When I use a word . . . . Sydenham Societies

Thomas Sydenham (1624–89), best known perhaps for having described the form of chorea that is named after him and is also known as St Vitus’s dance, has also given his name to three societies. The Sydenham Society (1843–57) and the New Sydenham Society (1859–1907) were both founded with the intention of publishing important medical texts, both classical and in modern European languages, in English translations, which they did at a rate of 3–6 per year during their existence. Of the two modern Sydenham Societies, one is devoted to promoting rigorous methods of patient oriented research, consistent with Sydenham’s own philosophy of medical practice. The other serves the community of Sydenham, a district in southeast London, whose name derives from Old English words meaning a wide water meadow; Thomas Sydenham’s forebears came from Sydenham in Somerset.

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Thomas Sydenham

Thomas Sydenham (1624–89) was an English physician. He took the degree of bachelor of medicine in 1648, but did not precede it with an arts degree, which made it unacceptable. He later qualified properly in 1663 by obtaining the licensiateship of the College of Physicians after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Although he had been a supporter of Oliver Cromwell, he escaped mention in The Act of Free and General Pardon, Indemnity, and Oblivion of August 1660, which included the names of those who were not pardoned by Charles II and were therefore condemned to death.

Sydenham espoused Hippocratic and Helmontian approaches to clinical practice. He is regarded as the father of clinical medicine and has been called the English Hippocrates. He is perhaps best known for his 1696 description of a form of chorea that now bears his name and is also known as St Vitus’s dance.

The Sydenham Society

The first Sydenham Society was founded in 1843, with the aim of publishing important medical texts that were not readily accessible. At that time several Victorian text publishing societies already existed, formed specifically for the purpose of publishing important literature in their fields. The Camden Society, for example, was founded in 1838 in order to publish early historical and literary works; the Percy Society was founded in 1840 to publish limited editions of rare poems and songs; and the Parker Society was founded in 1841 to publish editions of the works of the early Protestant writers of the English Reformation.6

The aims of the Sydenham Society were described in its prospectus as follows:

“The Sydenham Society has been founded for the purpose of meeting certain acknowledged deficiencies in the diffusion of medical literature, which are not likely to be supplied by the efforts of individuals. It will carry this object into effect by distributing among its members—

1. Reprints of standard English medical works, which are rare and expensive.
2. Miscellaneous Selections from the ancient and from the earlier modern authors, reprinted or translated.
3. Digests of the most important matters contained in old and voluminous authors, British and foreign, with occasional biographical and bibliographical notices.
4. Translations of the Greek and Latin medical authors, and of works in the Arabic and other Eastern languages, accompanied, when it is thought desirable, by the original text.
5. Translations of recent foreign works of merit.
6. Original works of great merit, which might be very valuable as books of reference, but which would not otherwise be published, from not being likely to have a remunerating sale,—such as classified Bibliographies, and alphabetical Indexes to periodical publications and other valuable voluminous works.”

During its first year (1843–4) the society published three volumes, Hecker’s Epidemics of the Middle Ages, Louis on Phthisis, and Thomae Sydenham, M.D., Opera Omnia, the last in Latin, edited by William Alexander Greenhill; an English translation was later published in two volumes, in 1848 and 1850. Thereafter it published at least three books per year, sometimes four, and occasionally even five. For example, in its fourth year it published The Works of W Hesmon, Dupuytren’s Lectures on Diseases and Injuries of Bones, and The Works of W Harvey.

The society continued to publish texts for 14 years, but on 31 October 1857 the Medical Times and Gazette reported that “The fate of the Sydenham Society is to be decided on next Saturday. At the last special meeting resolutions were passed, having for their object the winding up the affairs of the Society, and its dissolution. This decision is to be reconsidered on the 7th inst. A strong feeling exists in many quarters that the step contemplated would be a great misfortune to our professional literature, and we understand that an attempt to reorganise the Society will be made.”
Sure enough, on 7 November, under the heading “Suicide of the Sydenham Society,” the Gazette reported that “there is much reason to fear that the Sydenham Society is about to come to an untimely end,” attributing this to falling membership. It commented that “All admit that it has achieved a great success in the past. It has published upwards of forty volumes, few of which are otherwise accessible to the English reader, and many of which are of the very highest worth.” And then, on 14 November: “The Sydenham Society is defunct. ... Rumours are afloat that a new Society on a somewhat modified basis, will be at once commenced. There can be no doubt that, without in the least interfering with the legitimate province of publishers, there is a wide field for most useful labour in this direction. The reasons of the failure of the Sydenham Society are quite apparent to all excepting its late Council, and its success, despite its faults, has been such as to afford the strongest encouragement to the originators of a new Society of somewhat similar kind.”

At the meeting, one of the society’s junior members, Dr, later Sir, Jonathan Hutchinson, had spoken against the resolution. He argued that “although the Society had possibly completed its work as regards classical literature, there was still a wide and useful field for it in respect to translations from modern continental works.” The chairman of the meeting, Sir John Forbes, replied that “if some young men thought the Society’s work was not finished, they had better form a new one for themselves.”

After the meeting Hutchinson conferred with members of the medical profession, who supported his suggestion, and the foundations of The New Sydenham Society were laid. “We had,” wrote Hutchinson, “no direct connection with our predecessor, but we adopted with but little alteration its laws, and were fortunate enough to secure the good-will of those who had held office. This was a victory a year or two later, when on winding up its financial affairs, its remaining assets were voted as a donation to our funds.”

The New Sydenham Society

The New Sydenham Society, founded in 1859, operated under 23 laws, as published in its annual reports, similar to the 27 laws of the original Sydenham Society:

“I. The Society is instituted for the purpose of supplying certain acknowledged deficiencies in the existing means of diffusing medical literature, and shall be called “The New Sydenham Society.”

II. The Society shall carry out its objects by a succession of publications, of which the following shall be the chief:—1. Translations of Foreign Works, Papers, and Essays of merit to be reproduced as early as practicable after their original issue; 2. British Works, Papers, Lectures, &c, which, while of great value, have become from any cause difficult to be obtained, excluding those of living authors; 3. Annual Volumes consisting of Reports in Abstract of the progress of the different branches of Medical and Surgical Science during the year; 4. Dictionaries of Medical Bibliography and Biography. Those included under Nos. One and 2 shall be held to have the first claim on the attention of the Society, and the carrying out of those under 3 and 4 shall be considered dependant upon the amount of funds which may be placed at its disposal.

III. The Subscription constituting a Member shall be One Guinea, to be paid in advance on the 1st of January annually and it shall entitle the subscriber to a copy of every work published for that year. No books shall be issued to any member until his subscription for the year has been paid.”

The yearly subscription of a guinea, unchanged from the original society, was equivalent to about £150 in today’s money.

The other 20 laws dealt with the appointment of officers of the society, the running of meetings, the arrangements for general meetings, both annual and special, the selection of works to be published, the annual reports and accounts, and the appointment and duties of local secretaries. Law XIX stipulated that “The Works of the Society shall be printed for Members only.”

The balance sheet for 1872, presented to the Fifteenth Annual Meeting in 1873, showed that the society had had an average of 20 members a year during 1859 to 1865, but that by 1872 the number of subscriptions had increased to nearly 3000. During 1872, income of £3435 had been balanced by expenditure of £2765, and the society’s accumulated funds thus amounted to about £670, equivalent today to about £900 000. By 1886 the membership had risen to about 3000.

The first work the society published was Diday’s Monograph on Inherited Syphilis, in 1859. Its last publication was, coincidentally, a volume containing monographs on the then recently discovered Spirochaeta pallida, in 1908.

The society lasted longer than its predecessor, almost 50 years in fact, during which time several famous medical men served as presidents, including Sir James Paget, Dr Hughlings Jackson, Sir Spencer Wells, and Sir William Osler. However, it too eventually came to an end, in 1907, with falling membership. In his retrospective memoranda, Hutchinson, who had been the society’s honorary secretary throughout its lifetime, wrote that “I do not believe that either of the two societies—the Sydenham or the New Sydenham, or both—have exhausted their field of productive labour.”

Later Sydenham Societies

Although nothing like the two original Sydenham Societies has since been contemplated, other societies similarly named have been formed. We can quickly dispense with the Sydenham Society, a UK civic society founded in 1972 aiming to be a voice for Sydenham, a district of southeast London (SE26). Its declared main areas of interest are conservation and planning, transport, and the environment. The name Sydenham comes from two Old English words, sid=wide and hamm=a water meadow; the district of Sydenham in London has nothing to do with Thomas—his family originated from Sydenham in Somerset.

There is, however, another medical Sydenham Society. Its founders named it after Thomas Sydenham, whom they regarded as an early clinical epidemiologist. Its first session was held at the 1967 meeting of the American Federation for Clinical Research in Atlantic City, NJ, USA. The intent was to promote rigorous methods of patient oriented research at a time when research was predominately laboratory oriented. In a brief account of the society, Concato quoted the late Alvan Feinstein, who led the Sydenham Society for many years, when he summarised the key attributes of the organisation in 1987: “The Society is aimed at a relatively small group of interested people, with no efforts to become a large, formal organization, [but] the format of events at the annual session [changes] in response to the changing environment and opportunities.”

Last thoughts

I have not anywhere found a reference explaining why the founders of the first Sydenham Society chose to name it such, but I presume that they named it after Thomas Sydenham. If that is so, it is slightly strange, given that their aim was to publish medical texts, while Sydenham was known for his espousal of bedside experience in preference to book learning. The modern epidemiological Sydenham
Society more closely reflects Thomas Sydenham’s own approach to clinical medicine.

Competing interests: None declared.

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.