When I use a word . . . . Medical anniversaries in 2023: The Lancet

The UK medical journal The Lancet, established by Thomas Wakley was first published on 5 October 1823 and weekly thereafter. Under his editorship the journal included an eclectic range of topics from both the sciences and arts, including political commentaries, reviews of plays, case reports (particularly reports of events in cases seen in various hospitals), editorials, brief commentaries on pathology and treatments (including quack medicines), extracts from newspapers, comments on various medical societies, and even chess problems. Verbatim accounts of lectures were a major feature and drew criticism from members of the medical establishment. This culminated in an attempt to obtain from the Lord Chancellor, Lord Eldon, an injunction on their publication by the surgeon John Abernethy, which was initially successful and later dissolved. During its first 10 years of publication Wakley defended 10 actions, six of which were for alleged libel, with total claims of damages to the tune of £8000, and awards amounting to £155 and a farthing. However, the journal survived the vicissitudes occasioned by his reforming zeal.

Jeffrey K Aronson

Thomas Wakley

This is the eighth consecutive year in which I have charted each year’s medical anniversaries, restricting them to multiples of 50 years. The 2023 list of anniversaries for years ending in ’23 and ’73 includes the year in which The Lancet was founded by Thomas Wakley, 200 years ago, on 5 October 1823.

Thomas Wakley (1795–1862) was an English medical journalist, originally trained as an apothecary, at that time a necessary preliminary to a medical qualification, subsequently becoming a surgeon; later, in 1835, he also became an MP and in 1839 a coroner.

Wakley was the youngest son of 11 children, born to Henry Wakley, a Devonshire farmer, and his wife Mary, née Minifie, in Membury, where many generations of his forebears had lived as landowners. After schooling at Chard in Somerset, Honiton in Devonshire, and later Wiveliscombe, also in Somerset, he was apprenticed at age 15 to Mr Incledon, a Taunton apothecary, then to Mr Phelps, a surgeon in Beaminster, and then as an assistant to Mr Coulson at Henley-on-Thames. In 1815 he went to study at the Borough Hospitals, the name given at that time to the United Schools of St Thomas’s and Guys Hospitals. Dissections were carried out at the anatomy school of Edward and Richard Grainger in Webb Street, near St Thomas’s.

After studying anatomy for two years, under Sir Astley Cooper and others, Wakley passed the examination for membership of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. He set up private practice in London and in 1819 purchased rooms in Argyle Street, near Oxford Circus. In February 1820 he married Elizabeth, the daughter of the merchant who had subsidised his purchase, Joseph Goodchild, who was also a governor of St Thomas’s Hospital. However, a few months later, in August 1820, Wakley was attacked in his hallway and his premises were burnt down. His assailants suspected him of having been the executioner who had been hanged for their part in the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820, to the horror and disgust of the crowd who witnessed the executions and subsequent decapitations by a masked executioner. Wakley recovered, set up practice in Norfolk Street, off the Strand, and in 1821 received compensation from the Hope Fire Assurance Company, which had previously refused to pay, having wrongly accused him of having lit the fire himself. The masked executioner is thought to have been Tom Parker, Grainger’s head dissecting-room porter and a resurrection man.

At about this time, Wakley had also made the acquaintance of the political reformer William Cobbett, editor of the Weekly Political Register and the Evening Post. Through Cobbett, Wakley met other journalists, including, in 1823, Walter Channing, one of the founders of the New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery. In the words of his biographer, S Squire Sprigge, Wakley “[in order] to set aright [nepotism, ignorance, and pecuniary traffic in the medical profession] determined to take the field with a weekly newspaper devoted to the interests of the medical profession.” That newspaper was The Lancet.

The Lancet

The first issue of The Lancet, published on Sunday 5 October 1823, and edited anonymously by Wakley, contained an eclectic mixture of articles on science and the arts, a combination disappointingly missing from most modern medical journals. Wakley began with a preface, in which he outlined his purposes, which were, in “a complete Chronicle of current Literature,” to disseminate medical information and to lay bare the forms of medical malpractice, including nepotism, of which Wakley accused the medical establishment. “We hope the age of Mental Delusion has passed,” he wrote, “and that mystery and concealment will no longer be encouraged. Indeed we trust that mystery and ignorance will shortly be considered synonymous.” The first issue included attacks on Pitt the Younger and a dissenting minister, Dr Collyer, reviews of plays...
currently being performed in London, case reports, editorials, brief commentaries on pathology and treatments, including quack medicines, an appreciation of the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, and extracts from newspapers. A fair amount of the content was reprinted from other sources, doubtless because of lack of original material, but also to bring to readers’ attention matters of which they might not otherwise become aware. Later issues highlighted reports on cases seen in various hospitals, comments on various medical societies, and even chess problems. Chess, Wakley considered, was “perhaps the only game to which the medical student may profitably devote any portion of his time and attention.”

However, the main feature in the first issue was a verbatim account of a surgical lecture that Sir Astley Cooper had given, to the enthusiastic applause of nearly 400 students, at St Thomas’s Hospital on Wednesday 1 October 1823. His subject was the principles of the practice of surgery, and he illustrated his talk with several clinical examples. At that time, students in attendance at medical schools were required to attend lectures by named lecturers, and to pay 10 pounds a year for the privilege. The Royal College of Surgeons would not confer a degree without the relevant certificates of attendance. Cooper was a superb lecturer, and Wakley’s intent was to make the contents of the lectures, which he described as “probably the best of the kind delivered in Europe,” available to a wider audience. In successive issues he continued to publish Cooper’s lectures. However, Cooper complained to Wakley that his lectures were his property and not to be reproduced in print. Nevertheless, after discussion, he agreed to allow Wakley to reprint his lectures, provided that his (Cooper’s) name was not attached to them.

Wakley extended his coverage of lectures to other practitioners, and on Friday 10 December 1824 Mr John Abernethy, senior surgeon at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, applied to the Court of Chancery for an injunction against Wakley’s publishers, Gl. Hutchinson, John Knight, and Henry Lacey. Abernethy seems to have been provoked by Wakley’s inclusion of Abernethy’s colloquialisms, including frequent expletives, such as “I’ll be hanged,” “egad,” and “in the name of God,” which embarrassed him and made him appear foolish. He also complained of loss of copyright and hence income. Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, initially awarded a temporary injunction, pending a hearing, but later withdrew it. Wakley gave a complete account of the affair in the Christmas day issue of 1824.

However, the dispute continued, and in May 1825 Abernethy made a second application to the Lord Chancellor for an injunction on the publication of any lectures, his own not having been published for about two months. Eldon allowed the injunction, but dissolved it again following an appeal by Wakley’s lawyer on 28 November 1825.

Although the longest and most expensive, this was not the last legal struggle in which Wakley became involved during the first 10 years of publication of The Lancet. Sprigge reported that during that time Wakley was engaged in 10 actions, of which six were for libel; in those cases damages of £8000 in all were claimed, but the awards amounted to only £155 and a farthing.

Wakley died in Madeira on 16 May 1862. His body was embalmed and brought back to London, where he was entombed in the All Saints Cemetery in Kensal Green on 14 June. During his term of office, The Lancet had survived the vicissitudes, prompted by his reforming zeal, of the attacks that had been levelled against him by members of the medical establishment over many years. Wakley’s obituarist concluded, in the In Memoriam that appeared in The Lancet on 7 June 1862, coincidentally in issue 2023, that “The genius of THOMAS WAKLEY may be fitly characterized as inventive, initiative, and suggestive. He started principles; he founded institutions. These are the enduring monuments of genius.”

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1 Aronson JK. When I use a word… Medical anniversaries in 2023 6 January 2023. BMJ 2023;380.e07.


3 Anonymous. Atrocious attempt to murder, supposed robbery, and setting a house on fire on first Morning Chronicle 28 August 1820.


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Lancet on 7 June 1862.