When I use a word . . . . The New Sydenham Society Lexicon

After successfully publishing 80 volumes of medical texts, the New Sydenham Society embarked on the production of a medical lexicon, based on an earlier work, Robert Gray Mayne’s Expositional Lexicon. The task proved more difficult than the society had anticipated; it took 21 years and the publication of 25 fascicles, later combined into five large volumes, and it put great financial stress on the society. The later publication of the Atlas of Clinical Medicine, in 27 fascicles, was the final nail in the society’s financial coffin. Nevertheless, the New Sydenham Society’s Lexicon of Medicine and the Allied Sciences is an important publication in the history of medical lexicography. It has provided over 2000 instances for citation in the Oxford English Dictionary, of which about 480 are earliest, and often sole, citations.

Jeffrey K Aronson

The Sydenham Societies

The English physician Thomas Sydenham (1624–89) has had three societies named after him. The Sydenham Society (1843–57) and the New Sydenham Society (1859–1907), which I count as a single society, 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 three to seven a year during their existence.

Of two modern Sydenham Societies, one 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.

The other modern Sydenham Society is a medical one, whose 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, and it is devoted to promoting rigorous methods of patient-oriented research, consistent with Sydenham’s own philosophy of medical practice.

The Sydenham Societies’ publications

The first Sydenham Society was founded in 1843, with the aim of publishing important medical texts that were not readily accessible. It was wound up in 1857, having published 40 texts in all, at a rate of up to five per year (median two), and after a turbulent history, during which time it was criticised by Thomas Wakley, editor of the Lancet, and even by its own members.

However, some members, reluctant to let the old society die, founded the New Sydenham Society in 1859, with broadly speaking the same purposes. The New Sydenham Society was wound up in 1907, having published 196 texts, at a rate of up to seven per year (median four).

In his history of the two Sydenham Societies, Guy Meynell wrote that the two societies were so similar in their names and activities that the new society might be mistaken for no more than a continuation of its predecessor. He further suggested that “the two societies differed fundamentally in their aims and in the way they were run, both of which determined the titles they chose to publish.” However, Meynell’s history of the two societies was founded upon the scantest of records. It is certainly true that the laws of the two societies differed in minor details, as I have previously reported.

However, my own view is that had the original society survived it would eventually have turned into the new society, by virtue of an inevitable change in personnel, the evolving demands of the membership, and the availability of new texts to publish.

The original Sydenham Society’s 40 publications covered a wide range of basic disciplines, such as anatomy, physiology, and pathology, as well as general medical and surgical topics, including four texts on various types of infectious diseases. The authors included Dupuytren, Harvey, Hippocrates, Rhazes, Romberg, Schwann, and Sydenham himself. It is not, therefore, surprising that the New Society’s 196 publications should have encompassed a further selection of texts, dealing with diverse aspects of medicine and surgery, expanding on such topics as haematology and gynaecology, and adding such topics as dermatology, hepatology, and pharmacology, while continuing to explore various types of infectious diseases. The featured authors included Addison, Billroth, Bright, Charcot, Colles, Henoch, Koch, Kussmaul, Stokes, and Trousseau.

In a natural progression, the New Society also introduced series of related texts, exemplified by the atlases of dermatology (17 volumes) and pathology (13 volumes). It must therefore have seemed equally natural to them to have embarked, in the 1870s, after they had published 80 texts, on a project that proved rather more daunting: the publication, in a series of volumes, of a medical lexicon.

The New Sydenham Society Lexicon

In 1851 Robert Gray Mayne advertised a dictionary that he called an “Expositional Lexicon of the Terms in Medical and General Science,” which subsequently became known as Mayne’s Lexicon. He did so by writing a letter to the Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal, as the British Medical Journal was known at
that time: “The proposed lexicon is the produce of more than twenty years’ labour, intended to supply what at that remote period I, as a student, felt to be the greatest stumbling-block in my way,—the want of a proper explanation of technical terms, without which the illustrations of the lecturer were unprofitable, and often egregiously [sic] misapprehended. To this hour the same want is felt, and not only by the student, but also by the practitioner, there being no English work similar to my ‘Expository Lexicon’ in extent, character, or arrangement, in existence.”

In the 1870s the New Sydenham Society purchased the copyright to Mayne’s lexicon in order to produce a revised version. The committee may not have been aware of the history of lexicography and its attendant difficulties, or, if aware, may have thought that a medical dictionary, especially one built on an existing text, would not run into such difficulties. If so, they were wrong. The New Sydenham Society’s Lexicon of Medicine and the Allied Sciences took from 1879 to 1899 to produce and it was published in 25 fascicles. Starting in 1881 the fascicles were combined in five volumes, the last of which appeared in 1899.

A comparison of Mayne’s lexicon with the New Sydenham Society’s illustrates the large amount of extra work that went into producing the latter. Mayne’s text spans just over 1500 pages; the New Sydenham Society’s Lexicon over 5000. The first two entries in Mayne’s lexicon are “A” and “A Deux Temps”; the society’s lexicon includes those two entries, but interpolates between them over 200 new entries plus an extensive table of different varieties of abbreviations. Mayne’s text ends with “Vox Cholerica”; the Sydenham text includes about three dozen other entries after “Vox,” (although it omits “V. cholerae”) and continues with the letters W, X, Y, and Z, occupying about another 30 pages of entries and ending with “Zythus.”

The New Sydenham Soc Lexicon in the OED

It is a tribute to the thoroughness with which the New Sydenham Society’s Lexicon was produced that it is cited over 2000 times as “New Sydenham Soc Lexicon” in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). In many of those cases it is the only 19th century citation illustrating the use of a word, and it is often the only citation; in over 450 cases it is the earliest citation. For comparison, the various editions of Robert Dunglison’s Medical Lexicon (between 1839 and 1865) are cited just under 700 times, and only about 280 of those are earliest citations. And Dorland’s American Illustrated Medical Dictionary (1900) gets only 149 mentions, of which only 50 are earliest citations.

It is not very unusual for a dictionary to provide the first evidence of the use of a word. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, that the word was in general use before its inclusion in the dictionary but had never previously been written down. Secondly, that earlier examples (antedatations) exist that the lexicographers have not yet found. My own research into medical words suggest that antedatations of OED entries can be found in about 10% of cases.

For example, the term “anaplastic” once referred to the operation of anaplasty, in which external lesions were repaired by the use of adjacent healthy tissue. In the OED the New Sydenham Society’s Lexicon (1879) is credited with the earliest, actually the only, instance of “anaplastic” in this meaning, but earlier instances can be found: “Failure of an Anaplastic surgery for Cancerous Mamma” and “He divides his subject into two great groups, to the first of which he applies the name ‘Anaplastic Surgery’, and to the second that of ‘Autoplasty Surgery’.”

The final volumes

The production of the New Sydenham Society’s Lexicon put a large financial burden on the New Sydenham Society, compounded by the production of the Atlas of Clinical Medicine in 27 fascicles (two volumes) between 1902 and 1907, during which time only one other volume was published and after which the society folded. Nevertheless, the lexicon proved to be an important text in the history of lexicography.