Two eponymous surgeons: William Cowper and François Poupart

This year marks the tricentenary of the deaths of two surgeons who are immortalized by the anatomical structures they described but about whom few would otherwise know anything more.

When I commenced my preclinical studies in 1943, I rather enjoyed learning the eponymous names of so many of the body parts. Some were really beautiful; the bundle of Vicq D'Azyr (yes, the mammillo-thalamic fasicule!), the columns of Goll and Burdach (the posterior columns of the spinal cord), and so on. Of course, I had no idea who these people were. On my first surgical firm, I purchased Bailey and Love's *Surgery*, which had footnotes about the men behind the eponyms. I thought this a great idea, which I later adopted in my own books.

Of course, there are many today who condemn eponyms as being archaic and unscientific, as well as sometimes being frankly unfair. Leonardo da Vinci described and illustrated the maxillary sinus nearly 100 years before Nathaniel Highmore, a physician at Sherborne, had his name attached to it in the 17th century. However, I maintain that eponyms do add a little colour to our craft – especially if we look up the man, or woman, behind the name. This year we mark the 300th anniversary of the deaths of two men, one English, the other French, whose names are remembered almost entirely by their eponyms.

William Cowper

William Cowper (1666–1709) was born in Petersfield, Hampshire. He was apprenticed in London, first to William Bignall in 1681 and then to John Fletcher, was admitted as a Freeman to the Company of Barber Surgeons in 1691 and settled to a successful career in the capital city. He was a gifted surgeon and a keen anatomist, who set up the first private school of anatomy in London. He was elected FRS in 1699.

In 1694, Cowper published a magnificently illustrated textbook *Myotomia Reformata*, with a description of all the muscles of the human body and with an appendix on the anatomy of the penis and the mechanism of erection. Many of the illustrations were, in fact, 'lifted' from the beautiful anatomical atlas by the Dutchman, Govert Bidloo.

In the Philosophical Transactions of 1699, Cowper gave a description of the bulbourethral glands which now bear his name. These are about 1 cm in diameter, lie on either side of the posterior aspect of the membranous urethra and open into the urethral bulb. They may rarely become infected ('Cowperitis') or undergo cystic formation.

In point of fact, the bulbourethral glands had been described by Jean Méry (1645–1722), surgeon to the Hôtel Dieu Hospital in Paris, in 1684. To give Cowper his due, he made no claim to have discovered these tiny structures.

François Poupart

To turn to our second eponym, François Poupart (1661–1709) was born in Le Mans, France, of humble parents, and was educated at the local monastery, where he became interested in the works of Descartes and in the study of nature.

Deciding on a career in medicine, he travelled to Paris, where he lived a student life of extreme poverty. He made a special study of the anatomy of insects, carrying out patient and skilful dissections. In order to improve his knowledge of anatomy and surgery, he obtained the post of house surgeon at the Hôtel Dieu, in spite of having no previous experience and carried out his responsible duties with great expedition. Three years later, he obtained his MD at the University of Rheims. In 1699 he was admitted to the Académie des Sciences as a pupil of Jean Mery, chief surgeon to the Hôtel Dieu and surgeon to the Queen, who, as we have noted above, first described the bulbo-urethral glands.

Poupart was a polymath and an able student both of geometry and architecture. Most of his writings deal with the anatomy, life and habitat of insects, most notable was his monograph on the leech.

Poupart fell suddenly ill at the early age of 48 years and died within a few days. His account of the inguinal ligament in the Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences de Paris in 1705 reads, in translation:

'Two large, rounded easily visible ligaments, about the length of half a foot in well developed subjects, are attached at one end to the crest of the iliac bone and by the other to the crest of the os pubis, and the middle overhangs. They take over the function of a bone in the region, because they support the three great muscles of the abdomen – that is to say, the external oblique, the internal oblique and the transverse.'

In fact, the ligament had been described a century and a half earlier by Fallopius (Gabriele Fallopio) (c 1523–1563), Professor of Anatomy and Surgery in Padua, where he also occupied the chair of botany. He made a number of important discoveries, one of them being the bony labyrinth of the ear; the aqueduct of Fallopius is the canal for the facial nerve in the temporal bone. He added much to our knowledge of the reproductive system and described the uterine ('Fallopian') tubes.

Conclusions

Eponyms are great fun. When I was resident surgical officer in Sheffield over half a century ago, one of the medical student halls of residence was called 'Charcot's Joint'! BJHM

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