

# Peter Lowe: a father figure of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the death of Peter Lowe, one of the most colourful figures of early Scottish surgery and one of the founders of what was eventually to become the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow.

Much of Lowe's life remains something of a mystery and the subject of some conjecture. He was born in or around 1550, probably somewhere in the west of Scotland. Lowe referred to himself as an 'Arellian': did this mean related to the family name of Errol or to the University of Orleans, where he studied? However, he also called himself a 'Scottishman'. In about 1566, Lowe travelled to France and there he spent some 30 years, serving as a surgeon in both the French and Spanish armies, the latter during campaigns in Flanders. He certainly acquired considerable experience of military surgery.

Lowe also held appointment as surgeon to the French Royal household and King Henry IV for 6 years. Indeed, from the titles attached to his name in his writings, it appears that he studied at the University of Orleans and became a master-surgeon at the College of St. Come (the fraternity of surgeons) in Paris. In the 16th century, such travel, education and service as a military surgeon was quite typical of surgical training.

After some 30 years of practice on the continent, Lowe returned to the British Isles. He settled first in practice in London in 1596, and there he published 'An Easie Certain and Perfect Method of Cure and Prevention of the Spanish Sickness' (one of the numerous euphemisms for syphilis). In those days, venereal diseases formed a large and important part of surgical practice. Lowe was moving in society circles in London as shown by the fact that his book was dedicated to Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and favourite of Queen Elizabeth.

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The following year, 1597, Lowe published his important text 'The whole course of Chirurgie'. Like his book on venereal disease, this was published in the vernacular and not, as was the custom, in Latin. Perhaps in this Lowe was following his contemporary, the great Ambroise Paré (1510–90), who he must certainly have been well acquainted with, and who, having never learned Latin, published his extensive and popular surgical texts in contemporary French. Lowe's book proved popular in the British Isles. It was partly in the form of a conversation between the surgeon and his pupil (his son John), part description of surgical techniques and medical treatments, and part sayings of Hippocrates. It was well illustrated, many of the figures being taken straight from

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Paré's works, some still with their French annotations. Importantly, it contains the first reference in the English language to ligation of the blood vessels in limb amputations, rather than the cruel and inefficient old method of using the red-hot cautery. This he must have learned while in France directly from the teachings of Ambroise Paré.

Lowe also gave an excellent account of arterial aneurysms. He pointed out how they can be diagnosed by proximal compression of the artery, which will reduce the size of the swelling and abolish its bruit. He noted that death will rapidly occur when an ignorant practitioner incises the 'tumour', whereas cure can follow ligation of the artery, passing a double thread on a needle 2 inches above the aneurysm.

Lowe's more academic colleagues may have looked with some disdain at a textbook which was not published in Latin but, nevertheless, it proved to be a best seller and went through four editions. The following year, 1598, Lowe returned to Scotland, set up practice in Glasgow and was appointed in March 1599 by the town council to attend to the poor of that city with a retainer of 80 marks.

Lowe was not at all happy with the standard of medical and surgical care that he witnessed. Many so-called practitioners were no more than untrained charlatans and quacks. He brought this sad state of affairs before King James VI of Scotland, to whom Lowe had been appointed Chief Surgeon, as well as being surgeon to the king's son. King James granted a charter to

Peter Lowe, together with the physician Robert Hamilton and the apothecary William Spang, which was dated 29 November 1599, and which enabled this triumvirate to examine and supervise all practitioners of medicine and surgery in Glasgow and western Scotland. This corporation became first the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow and then the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow; a unique

organization that alternates its presidents between physicians and surgeons, and which grants higher degrees to both groups.

It seems quite extraordinary that Lowe, in just a few months, could have so impressed the authorities in the city of Glasgow, and then the King himself, not only to grant him wide clinical responsibilities, but also to allow him, and his colleagues, wide powers in the organization of medicine and surgery in Scotland.

Lowe died in the city of Glasgow on 15 August 1610, 400 years ago. He appears to have been in active practice until shortly before his death. He is buried in the grounds of Glasgow Cathedral. The memorial stone states 'Such a one who cured many while he lived'. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*