

Sir Samuel Wilks (1824–1911): brilliant observer who ‘rediscovered’ Hodgkin’s disease

Guy’s Hospital and its medical school rejoiced in a remarkable group of physicians in the 19th century. These included Richard Bright, a pioneer in the study of chronic nephritis, Thomas Addison, who described two diseases that bear his name (Addison’s disease of the suprarenals and Addison’s, or pernicious, anaemia), Thomas Hodgkin, who gave the first clear account of lymphadenoma and Sir William Gull, who documented myxoedema, its relationship to the thyroid and its resemblance to cretinism in children.

Less well remembered today, but fully warranting inclusion in this distinguished

company, is Sir Samuel Wilks, who died 100 years ago. Wilks was born in Camberwell, London, on 2 June 1824. His father was cashier at East India House. After school, in 1840, he was apprenticed to Dr Richard Prior, the family doctor, at Newington, where young Samuel learned to make up medicines, vaccinate and extract teeth using the dental key. At the same time, he was enrolled as a student at Guy’s, passing his MB in 1848 and his MD 2 years later.

Wilks remained as Dr Prior’s assistant until the latter’s death in 1847, when he took over the practice, and indeed married Dr Prior’s widow in 1854. Two years later, in 1856, Wilks was appointed assistant physician to Guy’s Hospital, and was promoted to full physician in 1867. For the first 10 years of his appointment to the staff in 1856, Wilks gave daily demonstrations in morbid anatomy and was curator of the pathology museum. He was responsible for introducing post mortem examination on every patient dying in the hospital; until then this had only been carried out

when there had been some doubt about the cause of death. In 1859 he published *Lectures in Pathological Anatomy delivered at Guy’s Hospital during the summer sessions 1857–8*. A third edition appeared in 1889; concise, well written and accurate. Many a pathologist who believed he had discovered something new would find that Wilks had already described it in his book.

Until the mid-19th century, syphilis was regarded principally as a disease affecting the genitalia and the superficial structures; its treatment was mainly the province of the surgeon. In 1857, a man died in the surgical wards at Guy’s after a long history of syphilis; much of his skull and overlying

erally associated with protracted bone disease, usually tuberculous or syphilitic. During his systematic examination of lymph nodes for lardaceous disease, Wilks found examples of generalized lymph node enlargement associated with splenomegaly, the spleen exhibiting white masses. Similar changes might be found in the liver. The patients were ill, anaemic and there was no leucocytosis. He believed that this was a previously unrecognized condition, and the medical journals held the same opinion when Wilks presented his findings to the Pathological Society. However, he came across a statement by Richard Bright that Thomas Hodgkin had described a

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condition of chronic lymphadenopathy. Wilks searched for, and found, Hodgkin’s original account, realized Hodgkin had forestalled him, and named

the condition Hodgkin’s disease, by which, of course, it is known today.

In 1865, Wilks transferred from lecturing in pathology in order to give the systematic lectures in medicine, which he did for the next 18 years. Postgraduate rounds were given on Sunday mornings. He retired from the staff at the age of 61 years, a year later than the usual retirement age, and was later made a hospital governor. In 1896 he was elected President of the Royal College of Physicians and served for 3 years. In 1897 he was appointed Physician in Ordinary to Queen Victoria and made a baronet.

In 1901, now a widower for many years and childless, Wilks moved to Hampstead; not surprisingly he became president of the local scientific society. In 1908, at the age of 84 years, he published a short book *Biographical Reminiscences*, mostly made up of abstracts from Guy’s Hospital reports which he thought were of special interest. He died on 8 November 1911, at the age of 87 years; truly a remarkable man. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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