Thomas Wakley: father of modern medical journalism

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the death, on 16 May 1862, of Thomas Wakley, surgeon, Member of Parliament, coroner, journalist and founder of the first 'modern' medical journal *The Lancet*. As you might imagine, he was a remarkable personality.

Wakley was born in the deep countryside of Devon. He was the youngest of eleven children of a prosperous farmer. At the age of 10 years, he was sent to Calcutta on a ship captained by a family friend. He never spoke of this trip at sea, but it might well have accounted for his later campaigns against flogging and brutal treatment in the army and navy.

After a public school education, at the age of 15 years, he served as apprentice to various apothecaries and surgeons, then proceeded to London in 1815, where he enrolled as a medical student at the United Hospitals of Guy's and St Thomas's, which then faced each other across St Thomas's Street in Southwark. In 1817 Wakley qualified Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons. He set up in private practice in the City, got married, moved to a fashionable address near Oxford Street and seemed to be all settled for a comfortable and successful career.

However, in 1820 he was assaulted and robbed in his own home, and the house set on fire and destroyed, together with its contents. Wakley was tempted to another career and established *The Lancet* as a weekly medical journal, whose first issue appeared on Sunday 5 October 1823. He pointed out that a lancet is not just a sharp surgical instrument for cutting out dross, but it is also an arched window, for letting in the light.

The journal was an immediate success. The fact that it was the first to be a weekly publication meant that it carried news of topical interest and allowed a lively discussion to take place in its correspondence columns. As an ex-general practitioner, Wakley was no high brow and aimed his journal at a wide readership. The journal carried general and medical news, theatre reviews and a weekly chess problem.

A prominent feature was its reports of lectures by distinguished London consultants, taken down in shorthand either by Wakley himself or by his assistants. Indeed, in the first issue, almost a quarter was taken up by an account of a clinical lecture by that distinguished surgeon, Astley Cooper at Guy's. At first, these lectures were published without the permission of the lecturers. They proved to be extremely popular with medical students, who were spared the expense of paying for the lecture courses. However, the medical teachers eventually cooperated with Wakley and delivered their manuscripts to the editor for reproduction.

As *The Lancet* rapidly established itself, the non-medical features largely disappeared and now Wakley turned the journal's attention to medical reform. He campaigned for hospitals to publish their statistics of results; in a series called 'Hole and corner surgery' the journal exposed surgeons who bungled operations. Naturally, this resulted in Wakley appearing in court on libel charges – usually winning his case or being subject to only token damages.

Wakley, in the pages of *The Lancet*, ran a campaign for greater democracy in the medical institutions, especially the Royal College of Surgeons, whose Council and examining board were both self-perpetuating. Not surprisingly, he was never promoted to Fellow of the College. His other campaigns included reform of the medical services for poor relief, control of quackery in medicine, abolition of flogging in the armed forces and campaigning against the common practice of the adulteration of foodstuffs.

From the early days of *The Lancet*, Wakley showed his intense interest in politics and, not surprisingly, he was elected, at the third attempt, as independent Member of Parliament for Finsbury, in 1835. In the House he soon made a reputation for himself by his powerful defence of the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs', the six Dorset labourers who had been sentenced to transportation for resisting the reduction in their wages. (They are regarded today as the 'founders' of the trade union movement.) Wakley remained a vigorous MP until he retired, after his health had deteriorated, in 1852. He interested himself in a wide range of reform topics, including prison, workhouse and law court administration. But of course it was medical matters that most concerned him and he was active in the drafting of the Medical Act of 1858, which established the Medical Register and the General Medical Council.

In addition to all this, Wakley became the first medical man to become a coroner, traditionally held by a lawyer, and was elected to this post for West Middlesex in 1839. He insisted that every case of suspicious death should be investigated and, in several incidents, he exposed negligence or maltreatment of workhouse inmates.

Wakley was a large man with enormous energy, who routinely worked a 16-hour day. However, in 1860 he developed the signs of pulmonary tuberculosis. He went to Madeira, where he appeared to improve, but had a haemoptysis in May 1862 and died soon after. His sons, Thomas Henry (who was also a doctor) and James, succeeded to the editorship of *The Lancet*, followed in turn by Thomas Henry's son, Thomas, who had qualified Licenciate of the Royal College of Physicians, and who became the fourth and last of the Wakleys to edit the journal, in a dynasty that lasted from 1823 until 1909. After Thomas's death, in 1909, the editorship passed from three generations of Wakleys to Squire Sprigg, who had written a biography of the first Thomas Wakley. Surely a unique story in medical publishing. **BJHM**

Professor Harold Ellis *is Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Guy's, King's and St Thomas' School of Biomedical Sciences, London SE1 1UL*

Conflict of interest: none.