

Jonathan Hutchinson: surgeon and remarkable generalist

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the death of perhaps the most remarkable ‘generalist’ in medicine that this country has ever produced. Jonathan Hutchinson was not only a distinguished surgeon, consultant at The London Hospital and a president of the Royal College of Surgeons, but he also achieved distinction in the fields of ophthalmology, dermatology, syphilology and neurology. He was a remarkable postgraduate teacher and a fertile author who, almost single handedly, produced 11 volumes of his own journal, *Archives of Surgery*. He pioneered scientific teaching for the lay public and founded two museums for this purpose.

Hutchinson was born in 1828 in Selby, Yorkshire, where his father was a prosperous Quaker merchant. In 1845 he was apprenticed to a local surgeon and the following year entered the York School of Medicine. In 1850 he transferred to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, studied under Sir James Paget and qualified Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons and Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries the same year.

Hutchinson then embarked on an extensive and varied period of postgraduate training. He worked at Moorfield’s Eye Hospital, City of London Hospital for Diseases of the Chest, the Blackfriars Skin Hospital, the Lock Hospital (for venereal disease) and the Liverpool Street Chest Clinic. He was a keen member of many of the London medical societies. In his early days, he derived much of his income from medical journalism, and in 1855 he joined the staff of the *Medical Times and Gazette*, which at that time was a rival to *The Lancet*.

In 1859 Hutchinson was appointed assistant surgeon on the staff of the London Hospital. He obtained his Fellowship of the Royal College of

Surgeons in 1862, became full surgeon the following year and remained on the active staff for the next 23 years.

He was a remarkable clinical observer. He described the stigmata of congenital syphilis – the peg-top incisor teeth (‘Hutchinson’s teeth’), interstitial keratitis and labyrinthine deafness, the three linked together as ‘Hutchinson’s triad’. In his Astley Cooper prize essay on head injuries he described the fixed dilated pupil on the side of cerebral compression (‘Hutchinson’s pupil’). He described the mask-like facial expression seen in tabes dorsalis, (‘Hutchinson’s facies’). He described at least ten previously unrecognized dermatological conditions. He also had a vivid way of describing

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physical signs, for example the ‘apple jelly’ appearance of some forms of lupus or the ‘potato tumour’ of the carotid body.

Although he strongly advocated conservative methods of treatment for intestinal obstruction by massage and enemas, he could be a bold and innovative surgeon. For example, in 1871 he was the first to perform a successful operative reduction of an intussusception, this in a child aged 2 years. His report gives a masterly review of previous cases, with their sad, invariably fatal, outcomes.

In his long career, Hutchinson established an enormous reputation as a teacher. His popularity with his medical students was demonstrated by his attempt to retire from the staff of the London Hospital in 1873 on the grounds of health and pressure of work. This led to protest from the students and staff which made him withdraw his resignation until 10 years later.

Interestingly, he opposed having women as medical students at the London. One point that he made was that there would be problems of the added burden of finding time to have separate classes for women – he could not imagine the possibility of

mixed classes. Moreover, he wrote that: ‘It would be with extreme reluctance that I should consent to taking any share in teaching women anatomy and surgery, believing that there is much knowledge in connexion with those subjects which is far better that they should avoid.’

For his postgraduates, he opened a clinical museum and lectured at 5.15pm, so that practitioners could attend after their working hours. His lectures, which attracted large audiences, were profusely illustrated with specimens and large coloured pictures.

In addition to his professional teaching, Hutchinson was a pioneer of science education for the lay public. In 1890, he established an educational museum and library of natural history near his country home in Haslemere. Here he gave regular lecture-demonstrations on a wide range of topics. In 1898 he extended these

activities to Selby, his birthplace. Although the Selby museum closed after his death, the Haslemere museum is as active as ever today.

In 1906 Hutchinson published a book entitled ‘On Leprosy and Fish Eating’, in which he put forward his observations that this disease was not related to climate or race, but occurred on islands, along shores and along the course of rivers. In spite of his long friendship with Gerhard Hansen, in charge of the leper colony at Bergen, Norway, who described the specific organism in 1874, Hutchinson stuck to his ‘fish theory’ until his death. Even the greatest clinicians among us are surely allowed to make one mistake.

Hutchinson served as President of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1889 and was knighted in 1908. He had married a woman from Leeds, also a Quaker, in 1856. Of their 11 children, one followed him as surgeon at the London Hospital, a second became a laryngologist and a third a general practitioner. Hutchinson died peacefully at his home in Haslemere and is buried, alongside his wife, in the local churchyard. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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