

John Abernethy, surgeon: a founder of the medical school at St Bartholomew's Hospital

John Abernethy was appointed to the surgical staff of St Bartholomew's Hospital, London in 1787, at the remarkably early age of 23 years. He did more than anyone else to establish its medical school. This year marks the 250th anniversary of his birth.

Abernethy was born in 1764 in London, the son of a merchant and one of five children. At the tender age of 15 years, he was apprenticed to Sir Charles Blicke, who had succeeded Percivall Pott on the staff at Bart's. Abernethy also attended the anatomical lectures given by Sir William Blizard at the London Hospital, who appointed the young man to be his prosecutor. When Pott resigned as surgeon in 1787, Blicke succeeded him, and young Abernethy was appointed to the vacancy of assistant surgeon. This post he held for the next 28 years, before promotion to full surgeon.

In 1788, Abernethy began his lectures in anatomy in a house near the hospital, published papers on various anatomical topics and, on the strength of these, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS). His lectures were so popular, in part at least as a result of his robust humour, that the governors at Bart's built a lecture theatre within the hospital to accommodate the students wishing to attend. (Abernethy himself had attended John Hunter's lectures and was his firm disciple. Indeed, after Hunter's death, Abernethy professed himself to be a proponent of Hunter's advanced views on physiology and pathology.)

Sir Benjamin Brodie, later a President of the Royal College of Surgeons, attended Abernethy's lectures as a student and later wrote: 'He kept our attention so that it never flagged and what he told us could

never be forgotten... like most of his pupils, I was led to look up to him as being of a superior order and I could conceive of nothing better than to follow in his footsteps'. How many of us could say that of our skill as a lecturer?

Abernethy's lectures did much to attract students to Bart's, so, at the time of his death, it had become the largest medical school in London, with Guy's in second and St Thomas's in third place. Another

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contribution to the popularity of the school was Abernethy's foundation of its Medical and Philosophical Society in 1795. In 1832 this was renamed the Abernethian Society. (I lectured to this august and ancient student body in 1976.)

Abernethy was not a particularly skilful surgeon and avoided using the scalpel when at all possible. He stressed in his lectures that the surgeon 'must understand the medical treatment of disease'. In the days when the great surgeons were noted for their speed and dexterity he certainly did not shine. However, when called upon to do so, he could demonstrate surgical ingenuity. He performed ligation of the external iliac artery via a lower abdominal incision in three cases of large aneurysms of the femoral artery extending proximally to the inguinal ligament. He gives a good account of this operation in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* of 1807. In his 'Lectures on Anatomy, Surgery and Pathology', published in 1828, he describes the fascia

covering the external iliac artery, which earned the eponym of 'Abernethy's fascia'.

In his lifetime, Abernethy was best known as a medical practitioner. He had a large private practice and drew patients from the wealthy and nobility. Patients were known to travel from Scotland to consult him. This, in spite of the fact that he was well known to be brusque and rude to most of his patients, no matter how famous, as well as to his colleagues and staff. He was said to stand with his hands in his pockets even when addressing royalty. One story of his rude and eccentric manner relates that, suspecting a corpulent ward sister at St Bartholomew's of being an alcoholic, he poked her in the abdomen with his cane, remarking: 'If that isn't a bottle of gin, ma'am, I beg your pardon'. There was a noise of broken glass and a smell of gin soaking her dress.

Of course, some patients were put off by Abernethy's manner and would seek advice elsewhere – often that of Sir Astley Cooper of Guy's Hospital, who had another enormous practice in London. However, the bulk of his patients seemed to have remained loyal to Abernethy in spite of his indelicate language and often rough physical handling. Apart from obvious surgical conditions, a lump, a hernia and so on, Abernethy tended to attribute all other more general ailments to disorders of digestion, which he regarded as the root of such conditions.

During his career, Abernethy had a long association with the Royal College of Surgeons, then in its early years. He served on its Court of Assistants and Council from 1810 to 1830 (where, in those days, he would also have been an examiner), and in 1826 was elected its President. However, he only served in this office for 1 year, retired as a result of ill health and died, after a protracted illness in 1831. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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