

# Sir Francis Laking: doctor to three British monarchs

One hundred years ago, on 21 May 1914, Sir Francis Laking, medical attendant to Queen Victoria, Edward VII and George V, died at his home in London at the age of 67 years.

The dozen or so doctors in England (together with several more in Scotland) who, in addition to their other duties, look after the members of the Royal family, together with their household staff, hold appointments that, in some cases, go back for centuries in our history.

The post of Head of the medical household, invariably a physician, has included many distinguished names. Perhaps the best remembered is Lord Dawson of Penn (Bertram Dawson, physician at the London Hospital), the only doctor to be made a Viscount. It was he who penned that famous medical bulletin concerning King George V from Sandringham (written on the back of a menu card): 'the King's life is drawing peacefully to its close', repeated by the BBC at 15-minute intervals on the night of 20 January 1936, which I can remember as a schoolboy.

The title of Serjeant surgeon (spelt with a 'j' and not a 'g') goes back for centuries, and again includes many famous names. Thomas Vicary held this appointment to Henry VIII and persuaded his Royal patient to grant the charter to the Company of Barber Surgeons, the forerunner of today's Royal College of Surgeons of England. Among the duties of the Serjeant surgeon is to accompany his Royal master into battle. The last to be called upon for this duty was John Ranby, who was in attendance to George II at the battle of Dettingen in 1743.

Joseph Lister, first surgeon to be elevated to the House of Lords, served as Serjeant surgeon to Queen Victoria and drained her axillary abscess under chloroform in 1871 at Balmoral Castle. On recovering from the anaesthetic she remarked: 'A most unpleasant task, Professor Lister, most pleasantly performed'. Although protesting that he

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was too old, Lister remained in this post under Edward VII, although he insisted that the much younger Frederick Treves should drain the Royal appendix abscess the day before the Coronation was due to take place at Westminster Abbey in 1902.

The apothecary to the sovereign and royal household is another post whose title goes back for centuries and its incumbent can be regarded as the 'general practitioner' to his distinguished group of patients. Francis Laking was one of the longest servers in this post.

Francis Laking was born in Kensington in 1847. He received his medical education at St George's Hospital, London, and at the University of Heidelberg. He qualified with the Licentiate of the College of

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Physicians (LRCP) in 1868 and, the following year, passed the Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries (LSA) and obtained his Doctor of Medicine at Heidelberg.

After a year as house physician at St George's, he was appointed medical registrar there until 1874. Later, he was appointed visiting apothecary to his old teaching hospital. In 1872, Laking passed his Membership of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP) and for a time served as assistant physician to the Victoria Hospital for Children in Chelsea, later to be appointed consultant physician to that hospital.

After leaving St George's, he entered into general practice partnership with Dr M. du Pasquier, who was also the apothecary to the Royal household. On the death of his partner, Laking succeeded him as apothecary to Queen Victoria as well as to several members of the Royal family, including Edward, the Prince of Wales. On the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, he succeeded as Apothecary to Edward VII and, in 1912, on the accession of George V, Laking continued in his office, now as physician-in-ordinary and surgeon apoth-

ecary to the King and surgeon apothecary to the Royal household.

Laking was by no means an academic. His only contribution that I can trace in medical publications is a paper he wrote in the St. George's Hospital Reports on indican in the urine.

A remarkable career, but what sort of man was he? Sir Frederick Treves' notes in the *British Medical Journal's* obituary columns reveal that Laking was a typical good Victorian general practitioner. Treves writes: 'In disposition he was quiet and retiring. He was rarely seen at the meetings of any of the societies; he avoided large gatherings and had an almost acute dislike of public dinners. His unbroken success as a Court physician rested upon a sure knowledge of his work, upon consummate tact and sound judgement but, above all, upon an absolute and unswerving devotion to his illustrious patients inspired by a kindness of heart and a genuine sympathy.'

His loyalty to his patients, as well as to his colleagues, was so unwavering as to be heroic... He was a great prescriber and devoted infinite pains to his prescriptions, always writing them in the orthodox form, with the date in full, in Latin. He claimed that no medicine need be nasty and went some way to make evident his conviction.' (This in the days when the nastier the taste the more effective the mixture must surely be!)

He never took any exercise, yet till his last years his health was excellent.

By the time of his death in 1914, Laking's long service to the Royal family had been rewarded with many honours; he was knighted in 1893, created a baronet in 1902, received a Knight Grand Cross of the Victorian Order in 1903 and a Knight of the Bath in 1910. His services to many members of European royal families were marked by foreign orders from the crowns of seven countries as well as his being made a Commander of the French Legion of Honour.

A remarkable career for a remarkable general practitioner. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*