

John Coakley Lettsom: physician and philanthropist

John Coakley Lettsom died 200 years ago, on 1 November 1815. In his day he was a highly successful GP, pamphleteer and generous philanthropist. Today, his memorial is Lettsom House, in Chandos Street (a short stroll from Harley Street), the splendid home of the Medical Society of London, which he founded in 1773 and which continues to flourish today.

John Lettsom was born on 22 November 1744 in the Virgin Islands of the West Indies, where his father was a successful plantation owner. The Lettsoms were a Quaker family, originally from Cheshire.

At the age of 6 years, as was the custom, Lettsom was sent to England to be educated and in 1761, at the age of 16 years, he was apprenticed to Abraham Sutcliff, surgeon and apothecary, in Settle, Yorkshire. Over the next 5 years he learned the elements of the trade – dispensing of pills and medicines, the application of leeches, bleeding, cupping, the binding up of wounds and fractures – as well as learning Latin. Wandering over the moors gathering plants laid Lettsom's lifelong interest in botany.

After his 5 years of apprenticeship, Lettsom enrolled as surgeon's dresser at St. Thomas's Hospital.

On the death of his father, in 1767, Lettsom returned to the Virgin Islands to take over the plantation bequeathed to him in his father's will. Here he performed a characteristic gesture; years later he wrote: 'The moment I came of age I found my chief property was in slaves, and, without considering further support, I gave them freedom, and began the world without fortune, without friend, without person and without address'. The young apothecary promptly opened a highly successful medical practice and acquired enough money to return to Europe and continue his medical education. He

entered the University of Edinburgh as a medical student in 1768, where he studied under the popular teacher William Cullen, visited several of the continental centres and graduated MD at the University of Leyden in 1769 with a thesis on the pathological effects of tea drinking. The following year he became Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians.

Lettsom now settled into general practice in the City of London, from a house in Basinghall Street, near the Guildhall. He must have impressed his patients with his care because he rapidly built up an enormous practice. In 1783 he wrote: 'since 1769, when I first settled in London, I have not taken one half day's relaxation', while 8 years later he recorded: 'during the last 19 years, not one holiday have I taken'.

'Lettsom was a truly benevolent man; he stated: "who will thank us for dying rich?" In his last years, having dispersed much of his wealth, he had to part with his suburban house.'

By the age of 40 years, he had the largest practice in London. He married a wealthy lady and had a large family; his eldest son, John (1771–1799), a physician of promise, sadly predeceased his father.

Lettsom showed amazing enthusiasm for good and philanthropic works, especially, of course, for those of a medical nature. In 1770 he was one of the founders of the General Dispensary in Aldersgate Street, the first of its kind in London, which gave free outpatient treatment to the needy with a resident apothecary, as well as providing domiciliary visits by its medical staff, of which he was a member. Four years later he published a report on the patients that had been treated. In 1774, he was one of the founders of the Royal Humane Society, to resuscitate the drowned, and in 1791 he helped to establish the Royal Sea-bathing Infirmary at Margate, for the care of patients with tuberculosis.

From his early days in practice, Lettsom warmly supported the practice of smallpox inoculation; an effective but potentially dangerous immunization technique using pus taken from a victim's smallpox pustule. When vaccination was introduced, following the work of William Jenner, Lettsom soon became a strong supporter, both in practice and in print.

Today, Lettsom is chiefly remembered in connection with the Medical Society of London, the idea for which he proposed in a pamphlet entitled 'Hints on the establishment of a Medical Society of London'. The Society came into existence in 1773, aided by his gift of a freehold house in Fleet Street as its first home, a considerable library of medical books and the establishment of an annual gold medal. His name is commemorated today by the Lettsomian Lectures.

The society was aimed to promote research as well as a social centre for the profession and was especially popular with those excluded for religious reasons from the higher offices of the Royal College of

Physicians. For this reason, Lettsom himself was denied from becoming a Fellow of the College.

Lettsom was truly an amazingly active man. In the midst of all these medical activities, he was interested in botany, fossils and natural history, wrote pamphlets against drunkenness, the evils of tea drinking and the value of keeping bee hives. Most of his writing was performed in his carriage as he was driven from patient to patient.

Lettsom was a truly benevolent man; he stated: 'who will thank us for dying rich?' In his last years, having dispersed much of his wealth, he had to part with his suburban house. He died at his home in Basinghall Street after 45 years of active medical practice and lies in the Quaker burial grounds in Bunhill Fields in the City of London. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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