

Thomas Hodgkin: physician and humanitarian

Guy's Hospital is rightly proud of an exceptional triad of physician–pathologists whose careers overlapped in the mid-19th century. These were Richard Bright (1789–1858), who noted the common association of ascites and renal disease, which could be distinguished from cardiac causes of this condition by the demonstration of albumin in the subject's urine, and who established the first ward dedicated to renal diseases. The second was Thomas Addison (1793–1860) who, in his short monograph described the clinical features of diseases of the 'adrenal capsules' (as they were then called), and in the same volume noted the features of pernicious anaemia. The third was Thomas Hodgkin (1798–1866), who described the features of what is now universally called Hodgkin's disease. This year marks the 150th anniversary of his death.

Thomas Hodgkin was born in Pentonville, London in 1798, the third of four sons. Both his father, a school teacher, and mother came from families that had been Quakers since the middle of the 17th century.

Hodgkin was educated at home until he was 18 years old, when he became private secretary to William Allen, an apothecary and social reformer, who introduced Hodgkin to medicine and reinforced his Quaker interest in social reform. Hodgkin then became articled to an apothecary in Brighton, spent a year on the wards at Guy's Hospital, and subsequently, in 1820, enrolled as a medical student at the University of Edinburgh. Here he qualified Doctor of Medicine in 1823 – his thesis (in Latin) was on the function of the lymphatics. During this Edinburgh period, Hodgkin spent a year in Paris. Much of his time there was spent in the study of pathology, but he also learned the use of the

newly invented stethoscope, from none other than its inventor, René Laennec.

Returning to Guy's, Hodgkin introduced Laennec's stethoscope, then a simple monaural tube, to the Physical Society of Guy's Medical School – a copy of it can be seen today in the Gordon Museum at Guy's.

After graduation, Hodgkin spent the next 2 years as physician and companion to the wealthy Jewish traveller and philanthropist, Abraham Montefiore.

In 1825, on returning to England, Hodgkin obtained his Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (LRCP) and was appointed lecturer in morbid anatomy (pathology) and curator of the pathological museum at Guy's. Here he gave the first course of systematic lectures on pathology in this country, prepared a catalogue of the museum, described the striations of voluntary muscle and gave an account of the shape of the red blood corpuscles.

In 1837 he published a paper 'On some morbid appearances of the absorbent glands and spleen' in *Medico-Chirurgical Transactions* in which he described seven cases of abnormal appearances of these structures. Six of the patients had been admitted, died and had autopsies at Guy's and the seventh was under the care of Jean Lugol in Paris. This was a fatal condition, distinct from tuberculosis, which affected the lymph nodes throughout the body. Sir Samuel Wilks made similar observations 30 years later, and it was he who named the disease after Hodgkin.

In 2010 the six Hodgkin specimens in the Gordon Museum were examined histologically by Dr Robin Cook, of the Royal Brisbane Hospital. He found that three satisfied today's criteria of Hodgkin's lymphoma. One was tuberculous, one syphilitic and the last an example of non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

In 1818, while still a young apothecary, Hodgkin wrote a document which declared that his main concern in life would be to protect the primitive, aboriginal, tribal peoples of the world from the European traders and settlers. He aimed to help safeguard their

rights, ameliorate their conditions and provide them with the skills to advance their progress.

In Hodgkin's later paper, 'Essay on the Promotion of Civilisation', he warned that the North American Indians faced extermination in the face of the European incursions into their lands. In 1837, Hodgkin became an executive in the newly formed Aborigines Protection Society.

These 'revolutionary' views of Hodgkin aroused the displeasure and animosity of Benjamin Harrison, who held the important post of Treasurer of Guy's Hospital, where he was responsible not only for the financial affairs of the hospital, but also for all appointments to the staff. Not least a reason for this disfavour was because Harrison happened also to be the deputy chairman of the Hudson's Bay Company, a particular target of Hodgkin. Without doubt this was the reason that Hodgkin failed in his application for the post of assistant physician at Guy's when a vacancy arose in 1837.

Deeply disappointed at his rejection, Hodgkin resigned his appointment at Guy's and began a small private medical practice. Here he charged modest fees for his consultations and treated many of his poor patients gratis.

As a result of his earlier travels with Abraham Montefiore, Hodgkin became a colleague of Abraham's brother, Sir Moses Montefiore, the leader of the Anglo-Jewish community. He accompanied Sir Moses as his personal physician on five overseas missions for the assistance of Jewish communities in Morocco, Turkey and Palestine, then under Turkish rule.

Thomas Hodgkin died of fulminating diarrhoea, in Jaffa on 4 April 1866. The exact diagnosis is uncertain, it could have been either dysentery or cholera, both prevalent at that time. The next day he was buried in the small Protestant cemetery in that town. Montefiore had a granite obelisk placed over the grave. Today, sadly, both the cemetery and the obelisk are in a rather neglected state. [BJHM](#)

Conflict of interest: none.

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