

Sir Frederic Still: first professor of paediatrics in the UK

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth, in 1868, of Frederic Still (he insisted on spelling his first name without the usual terminal k), the leading paediatrician of his day. His name is perpetuated in the term, still commonly used, of ‘Still’s disease’, or infantile rheumatoid arthritis. He was the second of the 12 children of George Still, a surveyor of HM customs, and his wife Eliza. Young Frederic showed great academic promise from an early age. He gained a scholarship to Merchant Taylors’ school, London and then another to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he gained a first class degree in classics in 1888. Still then proceeded to Guy’s Hospital to study medicine and qualified with his Cambridge degree of MB, BChir (Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery) in 1893.

After qualification, Still was appointed house physician to Sir James Goodhart, Professor of Clinical Medicine at Guy’s. Goodhart had a particular interest in diseases of children, which no doubt influenced young Still towards this specialty, and the following year, 1894, he was appointed clinical assistant at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. His annual salary was £20, he had no private means and he lived in penury during these early years. However, in 1896, Still was awarded his Cambridge Doctor of Medicine degree for his thesis, which bore the title ‘A special form of joint disease met with in children’. The following year his account of this condition was published in the *Medico Chirurgical Transactions* and also, in the same year, in Clifford Allbutt’s first edition of his ‘System of Medicine’, which was to become a standard textbook for many years.

In his thesis, Still described in detail 22 cases of chronic polyarthritis in children,

characterized by periods of fever, and with lymphadenopathy and splenomegaly. The condition might lead to stunting of growth as a result of premature fusion of the epiphyses of the affected joints. It is now regarded as a form of rheumatoid arthritis affecting children. Like so many conditions in rheumatology – think of the common ones, such as ankylosing spondylitis, juvenile kyphoscoliosis and Paget’s disease of bone (osteitis deformans) – in spite of many decades of intensive research, its aetiology remains mysterious. One difficulty in studying these diseases, of course, is that they cannot be reproduced in animal models.

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For the next 4 years, Still became medical registrar at Great Ormond Street and, in 1899, was appointed to the consultant staff of the hospital, as well as, in the same year, physician for diseases of children at King’s College Hospital (then situated near Charing Cross), the first of the London undergraduate teaching hospitals to establish a special children’s department. In 1901, Still was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, and in 1906 was appointed Professor of Diseases of Children at King’s, the first chair of paediatric medicine to be established in the UK.

Still was a prolific author, which added to his reputation as a leading paediatrician. He became co-author for the 6th to the 12th editions of the standard textbook ‘Diseases of Children’ (between 1899 and 1925), with his old chief, Sir James Goodhart. Still also published his own textbook ‘Common

Disorders and Diseases of Children’ in 1909, which reached its fifth edition in 1927. In 1931, Still published his ‘History of Paediatrics’, which was an exhaustive review of paediatric medicine from the 16th to the 18th centuries. In addition to his textbooks, Still published papers in the medical journals which covered most of the major aspects of diseases in children.

It was during Still’s working life that paediatrics in this country came to be established as a separate field of clinical study and practice. In 1928, the British Paediatric Association was formed, with Still as its first president. (In 1996 it was to become the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.) True to his classical training, Still insisted that ‘paediatric’ should be spelt with an ‘a’ for its second letter.

At the peak of his career, Still had a reputation as the leading paediatrician of his day, with a large private practice, yet he gave his services freely to those unable to afford his fee. He also served on numerous committees both within his hospitals and on children’s organizations such as the Dr. Barnardo’s Homes, the Society for Waifs and Strays, and the National Association for the Prevention of Infant Mortality, for which he served as chairman for 20 years.

Still retired from his hospital practice in 1934. Two years later he was appointed physician to the household of the Duke and Duchess of York, soon to become King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, so he would certainly have attended our Queen when she was a child. In 1937, Still was appointed Knight Commander of the Victorian Order, in recognition of his lifetime devotion to the welfare of children and his personal service to the royal family.

Still never married. He lived with his mother until her death at the age of 81 years. In his retirement he lived in Salisbury, regularly attending services in the cathedral. He died, aged 73 years, at his home in June 1941 and his ashes are buried in the cathedral close. [BJHM](#)

Conflict of interest: none.

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