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Pediatric Surgery History Club Lecture

The Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society 1789 to the present day: some leaders in medicine

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Abstract The Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society was founded in 1789 based on a model of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh by Sir James McGrigor and 11 medical students. The objectives at that time, as at present, were to promote teaching, self education, the application of medical skills learned at the bedside, fellowship, and social intercourse. A number of examples of key leaders in the profession and members of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Aberdeen are featured. These include Alexander Gordon (puerperal fever), Sir James McGrigor (founder of the British Army Medical Services), Sir Alexander Ogston (associated with Lister's theory of antisepsis in surgery and the discovery of the staphylococcus), Sir Patrick Manson (the father of tropical medicine), Prof JJR Macleod (Nobel Laureate and the discoverer of insulin), Prof Sir Matthew Hay (public health physician who offered the first description of typhus and its origins), and Sir Dugald Baird (the founder in the United Kingdom and Europe of modern-day maternity services).

The Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society, one of the oldest medical societies in Europe, was founded by James McGrigor in 1789 (Fig. 1). It was based on McGrigor's experience of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh founded a little earlier in 1737, which provided a forum and meeting place for both medical students and practitioners. McGrigor himself had attended Aberdeen Royal Infirmary as an "apprentice" and, for his further education, as was not uncommon in those days, went to Edinburgh for 1 year.

On his return to Aberdeen, he and 11 of his medical student colleagues founded the society, principally to compensate for the lack of a university education obtaining at the time [1]. Their concerns were that, although both the 2 universities in Aberdeen (King's College and Marischal College) had a Professor of Medicine, neither actually taught medical students. It could be argued that not much has actually changed in 221 years given the changes in curricula, the rapid student expansion, and the dearth of traditional academic posts currently in the United Kingdom!

The objectives, however, of the Medical Society at that time were 5-fold and included the promotion of teaching, the advancement of self education, the application of medical skills, a sense of fellowship and support for one's medical colleagues, and of course a focus for social intercourse. Indeed, these are still the principles that are held to guide the present activities of the Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society.

It was not until 1812 that the Aberdeen Medical Society was reconstituted as the Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society for which there were 2 sections: the "senior" members (or first section) were the qualified physicians, and the "junior" members (or second section) were the medical students. The junior section had its own President

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and Secretary and met regularly to discuss matters of importance for students, exactly as their seniors had done some 23 years earlier. The junior section of the Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society was eventually replaced by the University Medical Society and is still active today.

These objectives of the Med-Chi Society, as it came to be known, were set out in the "Regulations of the Society" in the first Minute Book of 1789 [1]; and although many of these regulations have been bypassed through the passage of time, the principles relating to the foundation of the Society very largely still apply. A number of useful publications relating specifically to the history and development of the Society by Dr J Scott Riddell [2] and Dr GP Milne [1] have given clear and precise historical reviews of the last 200 years of the Society since its inception to recent times.

The key interests for members of the History Club of the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons have to be the impact of what after all was a small local medical society on the larger world of medicine and surgery. I will now consider some key figures in the Aberdeen Med-Chi society who contributed hugely to our understanding of disease in one way or another.

Fig. 1 Sir James McGrigor (1771-1858)—the founder of the Aberdeen Med-Chi society and Surgeon General to Lord Wellington during the Peninsular War. Reprinted with permission [4].

1. Alexander Gordon (1752-1799)

Alex Gordon, one of twins born to the farmer Alexander Gordon of Milton of Drum near Aberdeen, was a keen, bright, meticulous young man. He was locally educated both at school and through the University of Aberdeen, graduating at the age of 23 years with the degree of AM in 1775. Like many of his contemporaries, his desire for further training following his spell in Aberdeen involved a "grand tour." His first stop in 1776 was Leyden in the Netherlands, at that time the oldest university and the most celebrated medical school in the world. Anatomy and the subject of medicine were taught, some of it actually by the bedside. Gordon returned to Edinburgh between 1776 and 1780, at that time regarded, as Voltaire wrote, as the intellectual and cultural capital of Europe.

The Edinburgh Medical School was already well established and flourishing with a balanced teaching in medicine, surgery, and midwifery. The teaching was in English (as opposed to Latin) and therefore proved attractive to students from near and far. A spell in the Royal Navy (1780-1785) as a ship's surgeon widened his experience of the real world. Further experience was gained in London based on midwifery at the Westminster and Store Street lying-in hospitals where he was taught by leading obstetricians such as Denman (author of a standard text on midwifery) and Osborne (obstetrician to the royal family). Here he witnessed for the first time the lethal effects of puerperal (childbed) fever with its mortality of more than 90%. Toward the end of 1785, he returned to Aberdeen and was appointed to run the Aberdeen dispensary as Physician and Obstetrician. Puerperal fever, which we now know is associated with direct infection owing to *Streptococcus pyogenes*, was at the time felt to be transmitted by a "contagion" or some form of "noxious constitution of the atmosphere" or "miasma."

There had been a total of 12 recorded outbreaks of puerperal fever between 1760 and 1788 in London, Manchester, Edinburgh, and Dublin; and he concluded from observation that, rather than it being something transmitted from the atmosphere, here was a disease spread via the birth attendants. He had established the mechanism of transmission, emphasized the importance of cleanliness, and then wrote a detailed treatise on puerperal fever (*A Treatise on the Epidemic Puerperal Fever of Aberdeen*) published in 1795. Gordon recognized that this indeed was a contagion and that what he was dealing with was an epidemic. The circumstances in Aberdeen were different in that it occurred not in a lying-in hospital (as was the experience in London) but in the city and surrounding villages. He noted that infection was carried by midwives from Aberdeen to the surrounding villages and the suburbs. Not only did he identify the mechanism of transmission as a lack of cleanliness; but the transmitting agents were named as specific midwives, including him of course.

After publication, he was vilified by the profession and the public alike and was forced to leave Aberdeen,