William Heberden (Elder) (1710-1801)

William Heberden was another illustrious British Physician. The high regard with which he was held is best reflected in Dr. Samuel Johnson describing him as “Ultimus Romanorum’ (the last of the learned physicians).1 Heberden is considered the founder of rheumatology.1 Heberden was the son of an innkeeper. He attended a school that provided free education. Impressed by his brilliance the school headmaster impressed upon his mother to send him to Cambridge. Heberden was then 14 years old. He joined St. John College, passed BA in 1728, became a fellow of the college in 1731, and passed MD in 1739 at the age of 29 years. He became a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1746. Heberden had the honour of delivering the prestigious Goulstonian lecture and the Harvenian oration in the years 1749 and 1750 respectively – a recognition of his talent and genius.1 He was appointed personal physician to the queen by King George III in the year 1761.3

Contributions to Medicine

Heberden excelled in clinical observation and made significant contributions to medical knowledge. His clinical description of angina pectoris in “some account of a disorder of the breast” is masterly. In his remarks on the pump-water of London’, Heberden pointed out the dangers of contamination and suggested distilling or filtering water before consumption1. His other contributions include differentiation of small-pox from chicken pox. He also pointed out the mildness of chickenpox, and its life-long immunity. He delineated night blindness and noted that tuberculosis often improves during pregnancy, but not postpartum.2

Heberden had a life-long habit of making notes at the patient’s bedside. These notes he reviewed every month to draw conclusions. On his retirement at the age of 72, he arranged his notes in order, and edited the notes for his commentaries on the ‘History and Cure of Diseases’.2 These commentaries were originally written in Latin (Heberden was a Latin and Hebrew scholar). The commentaries were translated into English by his son (William Heberden Jr.) in 1802 (one year after his death). The book was received enthusiastically and Heberden was compared to Hippocrates.2 His commentaries cover a wide range of medical illnesses.2 He was one of the forces behind publications of “Medical Transactions of the Royal College”. Many of his contributions were published in these transactions.

Contributions to Rheumatology

Heberden described Digitorum Nodi (the Heberden’s nodes) in arthritis deformans in the year 1782, and differentiated gout from osteoarthritis. He wrote “what are these little hard knobs, about the size of a small pea, which are frequently seen upon the fingers, particularly a little below the top near the joint. They have no connection with gout….. they continue for life; and being hardly ever attended by pain or disposed to become sore”. He
Heberden’s interests extended beyond medicine, e.g. Botany. There is a plant species named after him – “Herbinia”.¹ He was a classical scholar, and had published papers in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society.²

Heberden died in 1801. Lian and Lim write Heberden bequeathed upon us his legacy of the essential ingredients of observations, critical assessment of observations, and importantly, compassion for his patients”.¹

In his honour the official organisation of British Rheumatologists is named “The Heberden Society”.¹

References