Thomas Sydenham “The British Hippocrates”

Details of Sydenham’s life are few. The Sydenhams, an ancient family were in the time of King John, seated at Sydenham near Bridgewater. Thomas was son of Mary Geyffry of Catherstone and William Sydenham. Little is known of his childhood.

In 1642 he was entered at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, and left shortly after for military service as a Parliamentarian. He probably returned to Magdalen Hall in 1646, advised by Dr Thomas Coxe (PRCP, 1682) to read medicine, taking the degree of MB in April 1648. He was made a Fellow of All Souls, but went to Wadham as a commoner. He moved to Westminster, before 1661 when his earliest account of epidemics of London were written. On 25 June 1663 he was admitted Licentiate of the College of Physicians.

In 1666 was published the first edition of Methodus Curandi Febres, propria observata et superstructa, in the Philosophical Transactions, which became Transactions of the Royal Society, in four sections: continued fevers, the symptoms of continued fevers, intermittent fever, smallpox. The dedication includes a tribute to Robert Boyle. A second edition in 1668 included a chapter on the plague, which was epidemic in London in 1645 and 1646. It contains Latin elegies reversing Dr John Locke, the “founder of analytical philosophy of the mind.” The third edition (1676) bore the new title Observations Medicas, and was dedicated to Dr Mapletoft and included copious new material. Sydenham took the degree of Doctor of Medicine, not at Oxford, but at Cambridge (May 17 1676), possibly because his son was two years earlier admitted a pensioner at Pembroke College.

For three months in 1677 he was laid low by haematuria and gout, an affliction he first suffered in 1649. Then followed a series of Epistola Responsaria and Dissertatio Epistolaris describing smallpox, venereal disease, hysteria, and podagra (gout), and the celebrated Tractatus de Podagra et Hydropo, London 1683. These works were published in Britain, Geneva, and in Amsterdam.

There is an anecdote about him, curiously dismissed by Munk as “utterly valueless”: when asked why he did not write about diseases of the head, he answered that he did not undertake to write upon diseases that he was unable to cure. Times don’t change. Referring to his failure to become a Fellow of the Royal College, Lettsom wrote in 1804: “The great Sydenham, for all his labours, only gained the sad and unjust recompence of calumny and ignorance . . . “. However, Munk relates that “. . . he did not proceed doctor (MD) till after a lapse of twenty eight years . . . he was content with the minor degree, and, as such, was, by the statutes . . . inadmissible as a Candidate, and a fellow, as a fellow . . . examination of the Annals enables me positively to assert that he never sought admission to the fellowship.” Sydenham had a powerful influence on contemporary medicine. Diligent and scientific in his methods, observation and pragmatism were his hallmarks. He saw himself as the servant of God and nature. In 1689 still in practice, he was ill with renal stone, haematuria, and gout. He died at home in Pall Mall on 29 December 1689 and was buried in the church of St James’s, Westminster.

J S M PEARCE
304 Beverley Road, Anlaby, Hull HU10 7BG, UK