Medical “publishing societies” in eighteenth-century Britain

By David A. Kronick, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Medical Bibliography

Briscoe Library
University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio
7703 Floyd Curl Drive
San Antonio, Texas 78284

This article reviews the relationship between medical journals and publishing societies in eighteenth-century Great Britain. The importance of the perception that these journals were being issued under the auspices of societies is revealed by the number of times this kind of sponsorship was invoked by new medical journals. This kind of endorsement was projected even when a society so designated exercised only a nominal responsibility for the journal and, even when, in some instances, no organization can be said to have existed.

Among the papers in the British Library of Sir Hans Sloane (president of the Royal Society of London from 1727 to 1741), there is a draft of a proposal he made in 1735 for establishing what he called a “publishing society” [1]. Sloane’s “publishing society” does not appear to have materialized, but the term itself can be applied to some of the medical societies established in Great Britain in the last half of the eighteenth century.

This article reviews examples of these societies. Some of them appeared to have existed primarily for the purpose of publishing journals. This was true even when the journal’s association with a society was only nominal or even when the society did not exist except in name. The illusion was created that some sort of communal judgment was being exercised over the publication’s contents, even though the methods of managing this kind of institutionalized peer review were seldom articulated or, when described, often were not applied.

Sometimes even the suggestion of the involvement of an august society could lend credence to a publication. An example is the Medicina Curiosa, or a Variety of New Communications in Physick, Chirurgery and Anatomy (this is only a small part of the actual title), which appeared for only two issues in London in 1684. It has been called the first “serious” medical journal published in Great Britain [2]. The title can be translated as “medical curiosities,” an expression reflecting some of the interests of both editors and the public in that period. Examples of such “curiosities” in medicine and nature can be found in many of the learned journals of the period, including the Philosophical Transactions and the Journal des Scavans, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were among the major repositories of medical articles. One of the first contributions made by the eminent Robert Boyle to the Transactions was a report of a “very odd monstrous calf” [3]. Thomas Basset, the editor of the Medicina Curiosa, may have been seeking credibility for his medical curiosities when he pledged in the first issue, “Whatsoever I shall write I shall always submit to the London College of Physicians, whom the world will own for great and meet judges” [4].

SCOTTISH PUBLISHING SOCIETIES

Two well-known and popular series of medical journals published in Edinburgh, Scotland, beginning in 1731 are good examples in which the mantle of a society is assumed, even when the society did not exist or existed in name only. Both of these series had a great deal to do with establishing the prominence in Edinburgh as a medical educational center in the eighteenth century. The first, Medical Essays and Observations by a Society in Edinburgh, was edited from 1731 by Alexander Monro (1697–1767). The society under whose auspices the journal was issued was formed by a small group of professors at the Edinburgh Medical School, principally for the purpose of publishing this journal. The members met fairly regularly during the first year to consider papers read at the meetings, but, after 1732, the burden fell entirely on Monro’s shoulders [5], despite the fact that an
elaborate method of conducting peer review had been announced in the first issue [6]. Monro wrote more than 20% of the attributed papers that appeared while he was editor and is credited with having rewritten many of the contributions he received as personal letters [7].

Monro devoted several pages in the preface of the first volume of the Medical Essays in 1731 to discussing his aspirations for the journal and the methods by which he hoped they could be achieved. His purpose, he said, was to elevate the practice of medicine in Great Britain, to provide a place for medical reports that were unique and characteristic of the region, and to provide a publication addressed specially to physicians. (Articles of medical interest could be found in publications such as the Philosophical Transactions and the Histoire et Mémoires of the Académie des Sciences in Paris.) The editors, Monro added, reserved the right to correct and improve copy sent to them and to return the articles to the author for review. Their purpose, he said, was not to reject any essays that did not conform to their ideas but to make them more acceptable to readers. To that end, he added a long list of criteria and instructions to authors. During the first year of the society’s existence, submitted papers were read and discussed at the monthly meetings. In the following years, because of the lax meeting attendance, Monro took over the complete responsibility of selecting and editing the subsequent volumes [8].

In the preface to volume 5 of the Medical Essays (1742), Monro announced, “A society [was] being formed . . . for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge in which all the branches of medicine are included, and the members of our Society* [were] being adopted into the new one.” In recognition of this union with the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, the fifth volume was issued in two sections, one devoted to medical papers and the other to papers derived from the new society. The Medical Essays were continued after the sixth volume by the Essays and Observations, Physical and Literary from 1754 to 1765, under the auspices of the Philosophical Society but still under Monro’s direction. Over three quarters of the papers in the first volume were by physicians [9].

Monro’s journals were continued under various titles by the equally celebrated Andrew Duncan into the nineteenth century and frequently were reprinted and translated. The medical papers, still ostensibly under the auspices of the Philosophical Society, were continued in the second series under the title Medical and Philosophical Commentaries by a Society in Edinburgh, which appeared from 1773 to 1795. It was not until the seventh volume, published in 1780, that Andrew Duncan (1744–1828) put his name on the title page as editor and dropped the statement “by a Society in Edinburgh.” In the preface to this volume, Duncan finally confessed, “When, however, I am now to take upon myself what has hitherto been presented to the Public as the work of a Society, it may naturally be presumed that the abilities of an individual will be found unequal to the undertaking. To remove this apprehension, I may observe that the compilation of this work will not hereafter be more dependent on my exertions than it has already been. I shall still be regularly aided by some Gentlemen, whose reputation can receive no addition from drawing up a proper analysis of the work of others.”

Duncan nevertheless found it necessary to add, “No one who undertakes the office of a Collector can be supposed to vouch for the truth of what is merely communicated to him by others. The credit due to such circumstances, must in every instance, depend upon the veracity and discernment of the observer” [10].

The Philosophical Society, which by this time had received a royal charter, then began to publish its own Transactions. A significant number of medical papers were included for the first three years (1788–1790), but the numbers dropped off sharply shortly thereafter [11].

THE LONDON PUBLISHING SOCIETIES

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was a fertile period for the development of both medical societies and medical periodicals in London. Several of the periodicals were issued under the auspices of societies that had broader functions than publishing alone; others were formed primarily for educational purposes, to present papers before the membership, and to publish them selectively [12]. These were truly what Sir Hans Sloane called “publishing societies.” It was an age of improvement, promotion, and propagation in numerous fields: religious, social, intellectual, scientific, and medical. Many of the societies left no published records of any kind.

In some cases, records may not have been necessary. The Pylorus Club, for example, was made up of members of hospital staffs who were waiting for permanent appointments [13]. There was also a Society for Propagating Human Nature and Knowledge. The information about this society was derived from a bookseller’s catalog, which offered a book issued under its auspices entitled A Philosophical Essay on Fecundation. There were at least sixteen provincial medical societies in England in the eighteenth century [14], none of which appear to have published journals or proceedings of any kind, although some, such as the Convivo-Medical Society in Gloucestershire, where William Jenner first shared his ideas on cowpox, clearly expressed the intention to do so [15].
Of the medical periodicals issued in London in the
last half of the eighteenth century, ten identified
themselves with societies. The first was the Medical
Observations and Inquiries by a Society of Physicians,
published in six volumes, from 1757 to 1784. The society
had a small but distinguished membership consisting
largely of licentiates of the Royal College of Physi-
cians, who, at that time, were prevented from being
admitted as fellows. Among the members were Wil-
liam Hunter and John Fothergill. The society met
from time to time to discuss medical papers and to
select those to be printed. This journal has the dis-
tinction of having ten citations to its papers listed in
the Garrison-Morton Medical Bibliography. This record
for papers published in the eighteenth century is ex-
ceeded only by the Philosophical Transactions.

In the first volume of the Medical Observations, the
editor, who is not named (as is frequently the case
with publications issued under the auspices of soci-
eties in this period), provides some guidance to pro-
spective contributors in the preface: “Hypothetical
disquisitions, points of controversy, numerous and
needless quotations, in short whatever has rather a
tendency to show parts and erudition of the writer,
than to advance medical knowledge will be sup-
pressed” [16]. In the preface to the fourth volume
(1771), the editor assured readers, “A strict impartial-
ity in selecting papers for publication is maintained.”
The editor then adds, “Some ingenious essays are at
present withheld from the Public, to give the re-
spective author time to make them more complete.
This is only mentioned to prevent those, who may
not see their paper in this volume, from withdrawing
their correspondence.”

The editor then goes on to state a policy with which
modern editors are familiar: “An apology is necessary
for one article in the collection, as it has already ap-
peared in another work. Before this was known, that
article had already been printed off. The Society
therefore hopes, that those gentlemen who intend
to publish their works apart, will, for the future, render
such apologies unnecessary.”

A total of six volumes was printed from 1754 to
1784, at intervals of four to eight years. There appar-
etly was no great urgency to publish in this period.
Some of the volumes appeared in several editions.
The success of this publication may have been one
of the factors that at last long stimulated the Royal
College of Physicians to publish a journal of its own
in 1768. The college, formed under Henry VIII in
1518, found little occasion to publish except for reg-
ulatory purposes, with the exception of the Pharma-
copoeia Londinensis, which first appeared in 1618.
George Clark, historian of the College, informs us
that the journal “editor [again, not named] was to
receive twenty pounds for each volume, the papers
were to be read in the Theater after which the College
was to choose which were to be published and to
decide on the publication of inquiries and other mat-
ers” [17].

The fellows made their decision to publish at the
end of December 1766, gathered enough papers by
the summer of 1767, and finally published them in
1768. In the first volume, the college declared its in-
tention to solicit contributions from authors other
than its own fellows. The members of the Society of
Physicians in London were invited to do so, an offer
they declined until sometime after 1781, when some
of the tensions between the college and the licentiates
had lessened. The preface to the first volume of the
college’s Medical Transactions advised potential con-
tributors, “... things that are commonly known
should not be submitted, and negative reports are
welcome where appropriate.” A further note was add-
ed: “The College thinks it proper to declare that they
do not as a body mean to vouch for the truth of any
relation, or to give authority to any opinion contained
in the papers here published” [18].

The first volume contained twenty-one papers, pri-
marily those read before the college the previous year.
Almost half of the papers were by two of the fellows,
William Heberdeen and George Baker. The second
volume was published in 1772 (four years later), the
third in 1785 (after 14 years), and the fourth in 1813,
after an interval of twenty-eight years. Two addi-
tional volumes appeared, the first in 1815 and the last
in 1826.

OTHER LONDON MEDICAL EDITORS

Samuel Foart Simmons (1750–1813) edited the suc-
cessful London Medical Journal in eleven volumes, from
1781 to 1790. Like Monro and Duncan, he claimed on
the title page that the journal was issued under the
auspices of a society; in this case, “by a Society of
Physicians.” It is fairly clear, however, that it was an
individual endeavor almost from the beginning. In
the preface to the first volume, Simmons says that the
Journal had its origins in a “Society of physicians who
met together occasionally to converse on medical sub-
jects,” and that in response to their desire to make
“their meetings of use to the public,” they decided
to issue a monthly publication to serve as a repository
for original papers. The preface refers to the “editors”
but also reveals, “One of their members, who was the
first and most active promoter of this business, un-
dertook the office of editor, to arrange the materials,
superintend the printing of the work &c., while others
engaged to assist in the different branches for what
they deemed themselves to be qualified.”

The preface also stated, “Gentlemen of the Medical
Profession in every part of the world [are earnestly
entreated to contribute] accounts of useful cases, ep-
demical diseases, and such other matters as may tend
to the improvement of medical science.” The first issue consisted almost entirely of abstracts and extracts from medical works, particularly those of foreign origin. The first original contribution appeared in the second issue, but it rapidly attracted many others. The Journal was welcomed warmly, particularly by the foreign press. The Medicinisch-chirurgische Zeitung in 1790 referred to it as “this treasured medical work” [19].

In 1791, in the preface to the first volume of Medical Facts and Observations (the successor to the London Medical Journal), Simmons made it clear that he was and had been the sole editor. Because the Journal had been received in an “indulgent manner,” the editor had been induced to persevere in bringing it out at stated quarterly periods, much longer than suited his other avocation. But that mode of publication having at length been attended with great inconvenience both to his professional engagements and in the deliberate management of the work, he became desirous of conducting his future labours in a way more convenient and satisfactory to himself.

In other words, he said, he would publish a volume as often as he had gathered “about fifteen sheets in octavo” (i.e., approximately 250 pages).

During the time that he edited the London Medical Journal, Simmons was also a member of a Society for Promoting Medical Knowledge. In 1784 the Society published a volume of thirty-one Medical Communications without naming an editor. The preface to the first volume refers to “the editors” and states that the purpose of the Society was “collecting and publishing such papers on medical subjects as they think worthy of being preserved.” Of the communications in the first volume, fourteen were by fellows of the Royal Society of London; Simmons was responsible for five of them. The preface to the first volume indicates that “The Society think proper to mention that they are already in possession of some materials for a second volume, and they flatter themselves that when their design shall become generally known, the number of such correspondents will increase.”

The second volume, nevertheless, did not appear until seven years later, in 1790. The dates the papers were presented to the society are recorded as ranging from February 1785 to March 1790; ten of the papers were presented in 1785 and nine in 1790, with a scattering of papers in the intervening years.

Another “publishing society,” also formed in 1784, was the Society for the Improvement of Medical and Chirurgical Knowledge, of which John Hunter was a founding member. Again, no one is identified as having editorial responsibility. It is questionable whether the publications of either the previous society or this one can be called journals or periodicals.

The three volumes of the Transactions of Hunter’s society were issued in intervals of eight and twelve years. Hunter, Mathew Bailie, and Hunter’s brother-in-law Everard Home were responsible for a majority of the papers. Other papers may have originated with the members of the Lyceum Medicum Londinensis, another society formed by Hunter with the collaboration of George Fordyce. That society included, along with medical students, six teachers of various medical subjects in the hospital schools of London. The non-student members of the society were required to read, in alphabetical order of their names, papers on a medical subject at the meetings. There was also a competition each year (a gold medal was the prize) for papers submitted on a subject announced by Hunter and Fordyce [20].

A glimpse of how editorial affairs may have been handled in this period is revealed by a 1787 letter to Hunter from his former house student William Jenner, a devoted naturalist. Jenner had sent Hunter a paper, which he asked Hunter as a fellow to read before the Royal Society of London. Hunter, in responding, apologized for his inaction, because, he said, “... the whole of this winter we have had nothing but dispute in the Society, and giving up of the Secretaryship &c and are not yet settled, but when we are I will give in your paper, but shall take a copy of it, that in case they should not publish it in the Transactions, it may probably be published in the Medical Society, who will make more use of it than in the Transactions” [21].

Hunter did read Jenner’s paper at the Royal Society later that year, and it was published in the Transactions the following year, but not before it was sent back to Jenner with suggestions for revision [22]. Another communication of Jenner’s, which did not fare as well with the Royal Society, was the first paper on his experiments with cowpox. This time, Hunter was no longer available to intervene, and the paper was sent to another fellow of the society, Everard Home, who recommended it be rejected because it was based on a single subject (the young John Phipps), and, therefore, he said (with some justification), he “lacked faith” in it [23].

The mission of the Medical Society of London, which included surgeons and apothecaries as well as physicians, encompassed more than hearing and publishing papers. The society was founded in 1773 to form a united front against the Royal College of Physicians but published no papers until 1787, almost fifteen years later. The preface to the first volume of the society’s Memoirs states: “Medical papers, which may tend to the advancement of the sciences, will be received by the Society and such as may be deemed worthy of publishing, carefully preserved until sufficient matter for a volume shall be collected.”

To stimulate contributions, the preface included
the announcement that the society had "now resol-ved to give a Silver Medal annually to the author of the best memoir that shall be communicated within the year, which shall be decided by the Fellows of the Society, who being the judges of its merits cannot be candidates for the Prize." The response to this invitation must have been meager, because the five further volumes of the Memoirs were published at intervals of three to six years.

There is not much to say about the three remaining medical journals in London that were associated nominally with societies. One was the Select Papers on Different Branches of Medicine, by a Society Instituted for the Improvement of Physical Knowledge. The title page indicated that it would "be continued occasionally." Because only one volume appeared, it can be assumed that the occasion did not arise for another volume. The Medical Records and Researches Selected from the Papers of a Private Medical Association was published in 1798. The copy examined did not include a preface, so little can be said about the society. The volume contained the contributions of only three London physicians, and, when another volume appeared in 1813 with the same title, the Private Medical Association no longer was cited as a source of the papers [24].

The last of the periodicals to appear under the auspices of a "publishing society" in this period differs from most of the others in that the editor is named. It is the London Medical Review and Magazine, by a Society of Physicians and Surgeons, which appeared in six volumes between 1799 and 1802. The editor was William Blair (1765-1822), a London physician, who also authored books on military medicine and venereal diseases. The prospectus bound with the journal says it is the work of a society of physicians and surgeons "who had experienced the necessity of such a work, and who were convinced that much benefit would accrue from it to the profession, as well as the public at large." The members of the society had "agreed to associate together for the purpose of collecting, arranging and printing such materials as could be procured." The preface to the first issue states "... that they are determined to resist the progress of empiricism, under every form and pretense." To this is added what seems like a gratuitous policy: "... they must also take the liberty of suggesting that no consideration will prevail on them to insert an author's review of his own publication." (Such reviews were not an infrequent practice in this period.)

There remains only one more medical journal in this period, included for the sake of completeness. The Medical Magazine, or General Repository of Practical Physic and Surgery had an even more tenuous and ephemeral association with a medical society than did the other journals. Only a first number issued in 1774 is listed in any of the national catalogs consulted. LeFanu, in his checklist of early British medical periodicals, indicates that another number or volume was issued in 1775 [25]. There is some corroboration for additional issues in the published catalog of an eighteenth-century medical educator and editor, Ernst Gottfried Baldinger, with the numbers 1,190-1,197 indicating that Baldinger had accumulated eight issues under this title [26]. The title also appears in a German bibliographic journal in a list of monthly periodicals appearing in London in 1775 [27].

The title page of Medical Magazine indicates that it was issued by a "Society of Gentlemen," who may or may not have all been physicians or, for that matter, gentlemen. The designation of a responsible "Society of Gentlemen" appears on the title pages of many eighteenth-century general magazines, including the Critical Review of Tobias Smollett, a physician-turned-journalist.

**CONCLUSION**

The environment in which medicine is practiced and in which research is pursued today is vastly different than it was in eighteenth-century Great Britain. Medicine then was still more of an art than a science. To a greater degree than today, medicine back then shared many of the characteristics of the humanities in that knowledge was largely noncumulative. For this reason, obsolescence of medical literature was not a great problem. This is indicated by the fact that medical journals of that period were reprinted and translated decades after they were first issued. It can be said with some assurance that deadlines were not much of a problem for eighteenth-century editors. Periodicals were more like today's multiauthored monographs and were reviewed in the same fashion. The incentives to publish obviously were not very great, or there would not have been such long delays in publishing. Peer review of papers submitted to societies was carried out largely through reading and discussing them before the membership. The importance placed on the perception that contributions were reviewed by a society is demonstrated by the number of times this was implied rather than applied.

It is a great leap from the medical journalism of the eighteenth century to that of today. In contrast to the situation in the eighteenth century, biomedical journalism today presents a complex and diffuse picture in which new disciplines and new mission-oriented subjects are constantly created and combined. The evolution of medical journalism between the end of the eighteenth century and the end of the twentieth has not yet been thoroughly examined. However, it is obvious that there were many highly significant changes in the production and management of scientific communications during that period. On the other hand, some things have not changed at all. The
scientific and medical community still has a responsibility to monitor the quality of communications. In addition, these communications continue to be distributed primarily in the form of journals, a format that in many ways has not changed from that of the eighteenth century, and perhaps may not be the most appropriate to the needs of the medical community today.

REFERENCES

4. JOHNSTON-SAINT, op. cit.
8. EMERSON, op. cit., 158.
12. CLARK, op. cit., 554.
15. Ibid., 32.
17. CLARK, op. cit., 579.
25. Ibid.

Received August 1993; accepted December 1993