

MEDICAL JOURNALISM IN THE  
UNITED STATES\*

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A very interesting address on Medical Journalism was delivered by Dr. Morris Fishbein, Editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in Boston, at a dinner given in the Hotel Somerset to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, and the appearance of its first issue.

After the story of its founding, and the various experiences of its several Editorial Boards during its hundred years of existence had been told by members of its past and present staffs, Dr. Fishbein was called upon by the chairman and began his address, of which we present only an abstract, by quoting from the opening remarks of Oliver Wendell Holmes in his address delivered at the opening of the Boston Medical Library on December 3, 1878, a date which also marked the half century of the existence of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*.

"To-day, the quarterly, the monthly, the weekly periodical in its flimsy unsupported dress of paper, and the daily journal, naked as it came from the womb of the press, hold the larger part of the fresh reading we live upon. We must have the latest thought in its latest expression; the page must be newly turned like the morning bannock; the pamphlet must be newly opened like the ante-prandial oyster."

MEDICAL JOURNALISM IN THE PAST

Two hundred years have elapsed since the first medical periodical of any kind appeared to mark progress in medical science. That publication was the *Nouvelles Découvertes sur Toutes les Parties de la Médecine* of Nicolas de Blegny, issued in Paris from 1679 to 1681, translated into German and published at Hamburg in 1680 as *Monatliche neueröffnete Anmerkungen*, and translated into Latin and continued at Geneva as the *Zodiacus medico-gallicus* by Théophile Bonet from 1680 to 1685. Garrison

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says of the pioneer medical journalist that he was also the author of a series of satirical sketches of his contemporaries which, published as the "Mercurie savant" in 1684, became the original of subsequent "city directories." Medicine may well be proud of the fact that the publisher of the first newspaper of France was also a physician. Théophraste Renaudot was the originator of the *Gazette de France*, issued in 1631, perhaps the fifth or sixth newspaper in every sense of the word to be published in the world. Like a true-hearted physician he founded his paper for the good of mankind, principally to support his hospital plans, his dispensaries, and other charities. He was also the originator of pawn shops and intelligence offices.

The first English medical journal was the *Medicina curiosa*, which appeared from June 17 to October 23, 1684. Other medical periodical publications followed promptly. Hufeland was editor of four. During the eighteenth century some eighty medical periodicals were published, of which fifty-five were German, three French, four English, and one American. "At the commencement of the Revolutionary War," according to John Shaw Billings, "we had one medical book by an American author, three reprints and about twenty pamphlets." After the Revolution was effected the first medical journal published in the United States was a quarterly, the *New York Medical Repository*, edited by Elihu Hubbard Smith, Edward Miller and Samuel L. Mitchell, all of New York. It survived a precarious existence through twenty-three volumes. In 1804 the *Philadelphia Medical Museum* appeared and two years later the *Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal*. Then New York countered with the *Medical and Philosophical Register* in 1810, and Philadelphia came forward with the *Eclectic Repository* in 1811. In 1812 the *New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery* was established in Boston, but after sixteen years was merged into the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. However, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* was not the first weekly publication. That honour goes to the *Medical Intelligencer*, established in 1823 by Dr. J. V. C. Smith of Boston. Meanwhile Thomas Wakley founded the *London Lancet* on October 5, 1823, and medical publishing became significant as journalism.

In "The Life and Times of Thomas Wakley" by S. Squire Sprigge, appears the story of the courageous, satirical, commanding personality who first used a medical periodical to accomplish great medical and public reforms. Wakley was twenty-eight years old when he established the *Lancet*. He had had no literary experience, but he seems to have known the news interest that lies in conflict. In the preface to his first number he announced definitely the battles in which he planned to engage. His first interest was to bring medicine out of the veil of mystery in which it had so long resided into the public light.

"We hope the age of 'Mental Delusion' has passed, and that mystery and concealment will no longer be encouraged. Indeed, we trust that mystery and ignorance will shortly be considered synonymous. Ceremonies and signs have now lost their charms, hieroglyphics and gilded serpents their power to deceive. But for these it would be impossible to imagine how it happened that medical and dietetical knowledge, of all other the most calculated to benefit Man, should have been by him the most neglected. He studies with the greatest attention and assiduity the constitutions of his horses and dogs and learns all their peculiarities; whilst of the nature of his own he is totally uninformed and equally unskilled as regards his infant offspring. Yet a little reflection and application would enable him to avert from himself and family half the constitutional disorders which affect society; and in addition to these advantages, his acquirements in medical learning would furnish him with a test whereby he could detect and expose the impositions of ignorant practitioners."

The first number of the *Lancet* had thirty-six pages. In its arrangement and contents it has been a model for weekly medical journals. Beginning with a lecture by Astley Cooper, it proceeded with case reports, a polemic, two editorials, abstracts from other periodicals, an article on "The Composition of Quack Medicines" with an analysis of Dalby's Carminative, Daffy's Elixir, and Spelbury's Antiscorbutic Drops; then some quotations from the public press, and an open letter from Charles Lamb to Robert Southey, taken from the *London Magazine*. For the first ten years of its existence its pages were a duelling ground for battles between its editor and the reactionary leaders of medicine.

As might have been expected, this noisy newcomer in the field of medical journalism aroused resentment in the three contemporary medical periodicals already appearing in London. The various editors began to comment. One called the publication of lectures by Wakley "a monstrous breach of professional etiquette." Wakley retaliated by giving caustic names to his opponents. One, on account of its yellow cover was termed a "yellow fungus."

#### MEDICAL JOURNALISM IN AMERICA

In this country Dr. John Ware, born in Hingham, Massachusetts, in 1795, graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1816. He with Dr. Walter Channing edited from 1824 to 1827 the *New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery*, and when the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* was founded in 1828, served for a year as its first editor and copied in its early numbers the makeup and composition of the *London Lancet*.

In 1848 in the first volume of Transactions of the American Medical Association appears a report of a committee on medical literature, headed by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. Other members were Drs. Enoch Hale, G. C. Shattuck,

Jr., Daniel Drake, John Bell, Austin Flint and W. Seldon.

After deprecating the number of medical journals which then existed which in the opinion of the committee was due chiefly to their value as advertising mediums, their report went on to deprecate above all else the fact that the American literature of the day was largely British. "The fairest fruits of British genius and research are shaken into the lap of the American student, and the great danger seems to be that in place of the genuine culture of our own fields, the creative energy of the country shall manifest itself in generating a race of curculios to revel in voracious indolence upon the products of a foreign soil"

The committee in its report recognized the parallelism that exists between conditions in England and in this country, but recognized also definite differences in the American constitution, and the presence of diseases differing from those of the old world.

"Here is the true field for the American medical intellect; not to set English portraits of disease in American frames; but to co-operate with that fast gathering band of students who in other departments of science are studying what nature has done with her American elements, and teach us what disease is here, how it is generated, and what kindly antidotes have been sown in the same furrows with its fatal seeds."

From the tenor of the report and from other incidents, such as the fact that the famous essay by Oliver Wendell Holmes on "The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever" had been printed in 1843 in a medical journal that lasted but a single year, it may be taken for granted that the distinguished committee was averse to medical journalism of the type established by Wakley, and quite successfully followed by the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. They strongly objected to personal medical journalism.

An editor in their view is responsible that nothing shall be admitted into his pages the essential character of which is hostile and inflammatory, on the same principle that he is bound to be courteous in his common intercourse.

In 1853, the head of the committee on medical literature of the American Medical Association was that distinguished medical organizer and leader, Dr. N. S. Davis. During the year twenty-eight medical periodicals published had given 15,872 pages to medical literature, of which about half were original articles. The remainder consisted of reviews, editorials and news. Apparently Davis had looked through all of these publications to find material of importance. Much of it he considered was published merely to afford the author the pleasure of seeing his name in print. He emphasized his belief that many of the periodicals were published primarily to support commercial medical schools.

With all due credit to modern writers however, the general style of the material appearing in

1853 must be regarded as better than that of many manuscripts received by publications to-day. Authors wrote with care, philosophy, however, occupied pages in contrast to the brief space devoted to clinical observation.

While the committee stated that they were not prepared to propose any special mode of operation for encouraging and maintaining a national literature they considered that *such a desirable object was best promoted by elevating the standard of education; by the stern exclusion of unworthy articles from medical journals; and by introducing such a tone of general scholarship and scientific cultivation that the finer class of intellects may be drawn towards the rank of the medical profession.*

The *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* for the first half century of its existence included in its pages many notable contributions to medical literature and its distinguished list of Editors included such names as John Collins Warren, George B. Shattuck, David Cheever, Frank W. Draper, Francis Minot and J. V. C. Smith. Its volumes for 1846 and 1847 contain many interesting papers on the early history of anæsthesia, and the introduction of ether.

#### JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AND DR. SIMMONS

In 1899 there were nine weekly journals in the United States. They were part of a total of 230 periodicals issued in this country. Until then the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* had been the peer of any other medical journal in this country, if not the leader of all. Then came upon the scene an editor who was to be the Thomas Wakley of American medical journalism; a man who for twenty-five years devoted himself whole-heartedly to the promotion of the work of the American Medical Association—Dr. George Henry Simmons. The main objects to which Dr. Simmons devoted himself were: (1) The establishing of state examining bodies to act as licensing boards in place of the proprietary diploma-granting medical schools; (2) the improvement of medical education by the raising of preliminary requirements and the lengthening of the course, and (3) the regulation of pharmaceutical matters and of patent and proprietary medicines. For fifty years solemn committees had met annually and adopted resolutions on these subjects, but the medical profession had failed to speak as one voice in their support. After the reorganization of the American Medical Association in the first years of the present century, the Association began to speak powerfully and under the leadership of Doctor Simmons, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* developed a circulation which made it surpass in distribution any weekly medical publication of the world.

In 1900, about twenty-five per cent of the 230 medical periodicals were devoted largely to the publication of scientific articles; the remainder

were medical news and advertising sheets devoted primarily to the making of money for their publishers either directly, or indirectly through the promotion of medical schools, proprietary medicines or book publishing ventures.

When Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes spoke at the dedication of the Boston Medical Library in 1878, he deprecated the increasing number of medical publications. In 1913, the world's literature included 1,654 periodicals, of which 630 were American, 641 German, 268 French, 152 British, 75 Italian and 29 Spanish. From 1916 to 1917 there were 1,895 medical periodicals. Then in 1920, because of the World War, the number decreased to 1,240. This year there are again approximately 1,800 periodicals of significance, issuing 17,735 individual issues per year.

As he surveyed the literature of his day, *Oliver Wendell Holmes considered good indexing as the supreme need of medical literature.* Indeed, he recommended the formation of an indexing society in order to undertake this work. To-day that need is just as great. The indexing of the 1,800 periodicals now available required the making of 140,000 card references for the Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus. It would have delighted the soul of Oliver Wendell Holmes to witness this tremendous accomplishment. He would certainly have been a subscriber. *Without it, the vast majority of the periodicals published not only in the United States but in the whole world to-day would be ephemeral, after a few years well-nigh useless.* Libraries could not be encumbered with vast collections of bound volumes of periodicals, idle receptacles for dust. An index makes them continuously useful.

The *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* has always been a well-edited publication. Presumably this was due to the fact that its editor selected largely such material as might be offered by authors of sufficient education to write grammatical, rhetorical and intelligible English. The early committees of the American Medical Association recognized, however, that in a country in which at least fifty per cent of the physicians were not especially well educated, occasional scientific observations might arise which were of importance for scientific record but which their authors would be unable to put into intelligible English diction.

One of the significant features of the publications of the American Medical Association, inaugurated by Dr. George Henry Simmons, was the establishment of a corps of manuscript editors, and of a style for the American Medical Association press. As might have been expected, the semi-educated physicians whose contributions were thereby changed to excellent English writing were exceedingly grateful. After all, *it is the duty of an editor to edit, not for his contributors but for his readers.*

When Thomas Wakley put the *London Lancet* into competition with the medical periodicals of his day, they either gave up the ghost or improved themselves to meet his standards. When

*The Journal of the American Medical Association*, with the powerful support of the great organization behind it, entered the field of medical journalism under the leadership of Doctor Simmons, it proved a stimulus to medical periodical literature in this country. Many periodicals fell by the wayside or were supplanted by others of a higher type. A few unfortunately are still promoted as they may, perhaps, always be to attract the shekels of the unwary physician by appeals to selfishness, and the baser emotions to which doctors as well as other men occasionally succumb.

#### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In conclusion may I lay down a brief series of principles to guide editors, contributors and readers in this great galaxy of medical journals.

It is the duty of an editor: (1) to judge impartially in the selection of material for publication; (2) to consider the interest of the reader as paramount; (3) to maintain the high standard for medicine that it has had in the past; (4) to fight ignorance, quackery and fraud, not only by a campaign of silence but openly and continuously; (5) to refrain from personal laudation, and to publish nothing that will aid the individual seeker of the limelight in his ambitions; (6) *to be guided by good English style and diction but to avoid fancy writing and rhetorical bouquets;* (7) to be first with the most important articles and scientific news; (8) to be interesting—above all, to be interesting.

It is the *duty of a contributor:* (1) to be brief; (2) to be as careful in literary publication as in surgical operation; (3) to publish only when you have something new to say or something old to say in a new way; (4) to contribute only to those publications in which the products of your brain will be associated permanently with commercial matter equally clean; (5) to provide an adequate summary and conclusions; (6) to select a title that expresses the meaning of your article; (7) to make citations only to medical literature that has actually been consulted; (8) to eliminate carefully unnecessary charts, tables and illustrations; (9) to be as clean in writing and revising as in the hospital clinic; (10) to be interesting.

It is the duty of the reader: (1) to be interested; (2) to support sound publications by subscription; (3) to avoid derogatory criticism unless all of the facts are apparent; (4) to purchase approved products of merit advertised in sound publications; (5) to suggest improvement when the need is apparent.

The time has passed when any weekly medical periodical can long survive or gain the support of the medical profession if it be devoted to the personal ambitions of promoters or editors; or to policies that are reactionary, and to interests that are without regard for honesty and the interests of the public. The principles and ethics of medical journalism are as sincere and certain as those of medicine itself.

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