The lasting legacy of Sir Victor Horsley

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Working at The National Hospital for Neurology & Neurosurgery, Queen Square, is a daily reminder of the contribution Sir Victor Horsley made to the establishment and development of neurosurgery. He performed the first craniotomy for a brain lesion causing epilepsy and the first laminectomy for a spinal tumour, amongst other surgical firsts. He developed the transcranial approach to the pituitary and refined the technique of intradural division of the trigeminal nerve root for trigeminal neuralgia. He published widely on the topics of anatomy and physiology, where notably his experiments formed the foundation of current-day resuscitation techniques. He also invented the first stereotactic frame and Horsley's wax, an antiseptic mix of beeswax, almond oil and salicylic acid used to stop bleeding from the cut surface of the cranial bones [3].

What is perhaps less widely recognised, and makes his clinical achievements even more outstanding, is his influence on shaping the foundation of modern medical practice, widening access to health care and furthering the rights of minorities.

In an era when medical professionals were vulnerable to opportunistic litigation, he became president of a nascent Medical Defence Union and was largely responsible for its establishment in the medical community where it served to defend the integrity of the patient-doctor relationship [1]. He was also key in reforming the General Medical Council

from an institution whose "aspirations were often held as secondary to the habits and desires of its leaders" [1] into the respected body we recognise today.

Sir Victor was a strong believer in social equality. He supported the women's suffrage movement and campaigned for the recognition of nursing as a profession [3]. He supported a talented physician of mixed Afro-Caribbean heritage, Dr James Risien Russell, and was influential in his appointment as a consultant at Queen Square [2]. He also refused payment for his medical services from other doctors, soldiers and the poor [3].

In Sir Victor's day the medical profession was erring on the side of being over autocratic. Today we perhaps err on the side of over bureaucracy; however, the basic principles of medical practice that he strove to bring to the fore still underpin our daily practice. It sometimes seems that in today's increasingly complex medical arena we should take time to remember that, like Horsley's wax, still widely used, sometimes the simplest solutions are the most refined.

Conflicts of interest None.

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