Henry Gray (1827–1861): the great author of the most widely used resource in medical education

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Childhood and early life

Henry Gray, a British anatomist and surgeon, was born in Belgravia in 1827 (Fig. 1a). His father, Thomas Gray, was a private messenger to George IV and William IV [1].

On 6 May 1845, Henry Gray entered as a student at the medical school of St George's Hospital. Even in the early years of his education, his interest in anatomical studies was noticeably more. He learned the anatomy by dissecting each organ himself, rather than watching [1]. In 1848, while still a medical student, he won the Royal College of Surgeons Triennial Prize for an essay entitled “*The Origin, Connexion, and Distribution of the Nerves of the Human Eye and Its Appendages, Illustrated by Comparative Dissections of the Eye in the Other Vertebrate Animals*” [1].

Career and achievements

In 1849, Gray finished his medical studies and qualified as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. In 1850, Gray served as a house surgeon at St George's where most of his professional career was oriented around [1].

In 1851, he was appointed demonstrator of anatomy, and after 1853, he was promoted to the lectureship in anatomy

(Fig. 1b) [2]. He was also curator of the St. George's Hospital Museum [1, 2].

In 1852, he published two main papers “*On the Development of the Retina and Optic Nerve, and of the Membranous Labyrinth and Auditory Nerve*” and “*On the Development of the Ductless Glands in the Chick*” by the science journal “*Philosophical Transactions*” (Fig. 2a). Due to these successful publications, Gray was elected fellow of the Royal Society (FRS). He also became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons [2].

In 1853, Gray continued his researches on the spleen with the support of a donation from the Royal Society. These studies turned into a big thesis called “*The Structure and Use of the Spleen*” which helped him win the Astley Cooper Prize, named after a famous surgeon and anatomist like himself [4].

In November 1855, Gray had the idea of creating a new and perfect textbook for students. He discussed this idea with his colleague at St. George's, Henry Vandyke Carter. They worked together long hours on the dissections. Carter drew the illustrations, and Gray would write the text (Fig. 2b) [5].

In 1858, when Gray was only 31 years old, the book was published as *Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical*, consisting of 750 pages and 363 images, by John William Parker and became instantly popular (Fig. 3a) [3, 5].

Gray revised the text once again and the second edition was published in 1859 (Fig. 3b). The latest editions (41st) are now in about 1584 pages (Fig. 3c).

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Personal life

In 1861 Henry's nephew, Charles Gray, was inflicted with small pox, a dreaded disease in those days. While Henry was treating his nephew, he was afflicted with smallpox and he died on June 13, 1861. He was only 34 years old at the time of his death. Henry Gray was engaged to get married in that year; he died before getting married [1].

Fig. 1 **a** Henry Gray, a British anatomist and surgeon. **b** Lectureship in anatomy

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Fig. 2 **a** Science journal “*Philosophical Transactions*” where his works were published. **b** Sample illustrations

Fig. 3 **a** The book that was published as *Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical*, consisting of 750 pages and 363 images. **b** Second edition of the book. **c** Latest edition of the book

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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