



## Medicine for Managers

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### John Hunter

**John Hunter may not be a name that is instantly recognisable to some of you, but he is a hero of mine. He was instrumental in first recognising many developments in medicine that are now taken for granted and became a pre-eminent surgeon and anatomist who contributed much to modern knowledge.**

John Hunter, born into a farming family in East Kilbride in Scotland in 1728, was the youngest of ten children.



His teenage years were unremarkable, apart perhaps from his fascination for dissecting animals and collecting insects. At the age of twenty he left Scotland to join his brother William, then aged 30, who had created an anatomy school in Covent garden in London.

It is difficult to imagine how revolutionary a dissecting room was at that time. Commonplace now but the development allowed anyone interested in anatomy, most notably young surgeons, to dissect human corpses. John became William's pupil and reportedly spent much of his time in the early years digging up freshly

buried corpses from paupers' graves. He subsequently reorganised the activity to show prospective dissectors how to unearth their own corpses .

John Hunter stayed at his brother's school for twelve years during which time he reputedly was present at over 2,000 dissections, observing, studying, and later teaching students as well as collecting specimens for his own research. Relational pressures with his brother resulted in unresolvable tensions and led to his departure.

During this period he produced some ground-breaking discoveries about placental blood flow, testicular and inguinal anatomy and the lymphatic system. By the time he left the anatomy school he probably knew more than any other anatomist of his day.

Hunter was commissioned as an army surgeon in 1760 and travelled to French Belle Ile in 1761.

There he developed personal techniques for treating gunshot wounds. He noted that French soldiers with untreated gunshot wounds healed more quickly than British soldiers who underwent surgery, probably

the consequence of reduced risks of sepsis. He therefore recommended leaving some patients untreated unless there was gunpowder or other debris, a course which caused much debate. He left the army in 1763.

Hunter returned to London and formed a partnership with London dentist, James Spence, for at least five years. He developed a practice of extracting healthy teeth from paupers and transplanting them into the rich clientele.

Although the practice rapidly fell into disrepute, Hunter had discovered that fresh teeth were better than teeth from corpses and one of his patients claimed that three transplanted teeth survived for six years following transplant.

In 1765 he moved to Earls Court purchasing a large house with grounds in which he housed many exotic animals. He boiled down the corpses of many animals to retrieve the skeletons as part of his animal research.

Hunter developed an increasing interest and curiosity about venereal diseases, which were very common throughout London at this time. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1767. A popularly held view is that, as part of his studies, he self-inoculated with gonorrhoea in an experiment which failed because the specimen he used was contaminated with syphilitic organisms.

He believed that it proved what turned out to be an erroneous theory that gonorrhoea and syphilis were the same disease. He wrote *A Treatise on the Venereal Diseases* in 1786. In the publication he reports the experiment but does not indicate that it was performed on himself. It was more likely to have been performed on a third party subject.

He championed the use of mercury and cauterisation, although he wrongly

believed that gonorrhoea spontaneously resolved and used bread pills on some of his patients in an attempt to prove his theory. It is said that, because of John Hunter's reputation, his pronouncements about gonorrhoea and syphilis actually set back research on the subject and it was over half a century later that French physician Ricord disproved his theories.

Hunter was esteemed as an anatomist and a surgeon. He obtained life consent to perform post mortems on famous and influential people such as Sir Joshua Reynolds. He also sought unusual (deformed or extreme) specimens and is believed to have paid grave robbers a very large sum of money for the body of Charles Byrne who was better known as the *Irish Giant*.

For most of his life he worked on his theory that most animals came from common ancestors and that the earth was immensely old. He did not, however, work out the mechanism of evolution by which it happened. [Darwin published *The Origin of Species* nearly a century later in 1859].

In 1768 Hunter was appointed surgeon at St. George's Hospital. He subsequently became a member of the Company of Surgeons and in 1776 he was appointed Surgeon to King George III.

He put together his prodigious collection of skeletons and specimens at his house, purchased in Leicester Square.

He is said to have had 14,000 specimens. They were subsequently housed in the Royal College of Surgeons in Lincoln's Inn but sadly many were destroyed by a German bomb in the Second World War.

However nearly half of the collection still survives in the Hunterian Museum.

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Hunter became the best known and best paid surgeon in London, treating such patients as Lord Byron and William Pitt in his Leicester Square consulting rooms whilst treating some of London's poorest patients at St George's Hospital.

His legacy is clear. He was a highly skilled if irascible anatomist and surgeon whose research paved the way for many subsequent developments. His specimens are still excellent today, over 230 years after he first collected them. He pioneered observation and experimentation to improve understanding and surgical technique and to apply the knowledge gained to progress developments.

Hunter died, apparently in the Boardroom of St George's Hospital, from a heart attack (although some reports suggest it was a fit following an argument) in 1793. His pupils are said to have gathered for dissection as usual on the following day at his Leicester Square house only to find that the corpse on the table was John Hunter himself who had left instructions that his final contribution to his students' study was to be the dissection of his own body.



His statue stands in the atrium of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. There is another statue

in Leicester Square.

As a footnote it is interesting that the home of Dr Jekyll in Robert Louis Stevenson's *'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'* may well be based on John Hunter's Leicester Square home. His house had two entrances, a main entrance to the family home and a more discrete one to the museum and dissecting room. In Stevenson's book Dr Jekyll used the main entrance whilst Mr Hyde used the less prominent one. Hunter was also mentioned by H. G. Wells' *'The Island of Doctor Moreau'*

Note: The Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England is open to the public and is well worth the visit.

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