

# Dr William Johnston (1846–1900) of Leicester – an unknown Victorian general practitioner

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**SUMMARY.** The famous names of medical history are well documented, but facts about the little-known have to be sought after. The author was curious about the founder member of the practice he works in. By a painstaking search of local and national records, he learned that his Dr Johnston was an Irishman who practised in Derbyshire before arriving in Leicester in 1876. He was much concerned about the zymotic diseases, and his greatest achievement was in persuading the council to pass a Notification of Infectious Diseases bye-law in 1879, making Leicester one of the first towns to have such a regulation.

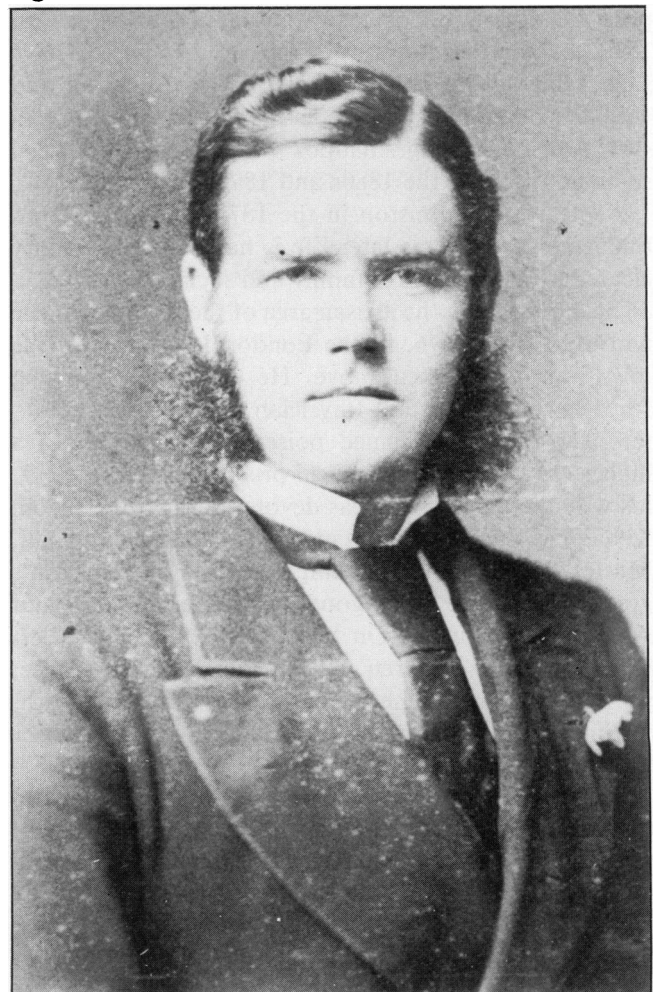
**WILLIAM JOHNSTON** (Figure 1) was the founder member of the practice in which I now work in Leicester City. I have researched his life to try and answer a few simple questions, such as: Where did he come from? Why did he come to Leicester? And what, if anything, did he do?

Briefly, he was born in Belfast and studied medicine at Queen's University, Belfast, from 1866 to 1870. Nothing is known of his family and little of his time in Belfast. The period 1870–75 is a total blank. In 1875 he appears as a medical officer at the Clay Cross Colliery Hospital, Derbyshire, in late 1875 he married a local farmer's daughter and by early 1876 they had settled in Leicester. Johnston remained in Leicester till his death in 1900.

Leicester in the early 1870s was a rapidly expanding town with a high mortality, especially infant mortality of 220–240 deaths per 1,000 births. During 1876 Johnston had printed a pamphlet *The diarrhoea of Leicester: its causes and prevention*. He also wrote to the local press under a nom de plume. Johnston's efforts to gain

recognition resulted in his being appointed a medical officer to the Provident Dispensary, an Oddfellows friendly society, and to the new post of Assistant Medical Officer of Health (MOH) and Superintendent to the Borough Fever Hospital. However, he failed in his bid to become a Poor Law Medical Officer. In 1880

**Figure 1.** Dr William Johnston, c. 1876.



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This paper is the summary of a talk given by the author at The Royal College of General Practitioners on 15 May 1982. The day was organized by the Society for Study of Social History of Medicine.

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he became the MOH, a post he resigned in 1885. It is to be remembered that all these posts were part-time.

Johnston is seen mainly through his official reports and the few articles he wrote, as no records of his remain. In his clinical work he appears to have been thorough and to have closely observed his patients throughout. His therapeutics were unremarkable, but he used the microscope to aid him in his diagnoses.

In matters of public health, he identified the town's drainage as defective, the town having doubled in size since construction of the original drains. He emphasized the importance of infant care and instruction of mothers. He went so far as to open a crèche in the hall of the church he attended; he and a colleague examined all the infants on entry. He was instrumental in getting the council to distribute free medicine during the diarrhoea epidemics, and by recording details of the people who requested medicine he built up an epidemiological picture of occurrence of the disease, as well as its fatality rate.

In his administrative capacity, he inquired into deaths in the town from tuberculosis, introduced Farr's *Life Tables*, advocated full enquiry into those deaths not certified by medical men, advised more medical attendance on maternity cases and women's restriction from work for a decent interval postnatally. However, his greatest achievement was in persuading the council to pass a Notification of Infectious Diseases bye-law in 1879, making Leicester one of the earliest towns to have such a law. With enforcement of this regulation and with an isolation hospital under his control, he devised a system of containing smallpox which earned the town some notoriety in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>1</sup>

A picture of Johnston in the 1870s and early 1880s thus emerges, but his later life is hazy and only partly cleared by a study of his family and social life. In 1885/86 he moved from the artisan area of the town, where he had lived since 1876, to the London Road area of the town—an 'up-market' move. He considered applying for the post of Assistant Physician at the town's Voluntary Hospital and seemed poised for a move into a higher class of general medical practice. Then, in 1887, his wife died. Johnston was devoted to his wife, whom he had met at a musical evening at her local church hall. Music and the church encompassed two of Johnston's great interests: he was a good bass singer and a devout Anglican churchman. On his wife's death he was left with two young children, but he continued in practice, presumably with some success, until his own death, having been dogged by ill health during the last two or three years of his life.

All this helps to answer some of my original questions. William Johnston was a Protestant Ulsterman, who funded himself through medical school while living at home. He came to England, possibly influenced by his Professor of Anatomy and Physiology—Professor Redfern. Why he came to Leicester is still uncertain, but maybe it was for one of the following reasons: his

brother-in-law became a curate in Leicester about the same time; the railway may have been a factor; or it may have been that Leicester needed doctors for its rapidly expanding population.

Johnston's method of establishing himself, in a town where he had no influence, is of interest. He gained a foothold by publishing a pamphlet, by sending letters to the press under a transparent nom de plume and by applying for medical posts as they presented themselves. His appointment as Assistant MOH put him in the public eye and he injected up-to-date ideas into a rather archaic public health department. He would have appeared more knowledgeable than most on the management of infectious diseases and child care. However, his 'upward' progress in medical practice was halted by the death of his wife, and his ensuing grief or even depressive illness plus his own ill-health meant that little more was heard about him until his own death. His obituaries give further glimpses of his character: 'A genial Irishman.' 'Breezy, bluff . . . but very tender-hearted.' 'He made his patients do as he wished.' 'A skilled practitioner.'

The great names in medicine are well documented in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, *Munk's Roll* or *Plarr's Lives*, but facts relating to the more humble have to be sought after.

## Reference

1. Fraser SMF. Leicester and smallpox: the Leicester method. *Med History* 1980; 24: 315-332.

## Bibliography

The following is a list of the sources that were consulted for information about William Johnston.

### *Leicester background*

- MacKinley R, Smith C. *Leicester, Victorian county history*, Oxford University Press, 1958, Vol 4.  
Elliott M. *Victorian Leicester*. Phillimore; 1979.  
Simmons J. *Leicester past and present. Vol 2 Modern city*. London: Methuen, 1974.

### *William Johnston*

- Family scrapbook—kept by his sister-in-law.  
Letters from relations.  
Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN.  
Ulster Historical Foundation, 66 Balmoral Avenue, Belfast BT9 6NY.

### *Local records*

- City Record Office: Town directories, Council meetings—minute books, Infirmary Committee meetings—minute books, Poor Law Committee meetings—minute books, Annual Reports of Town's MOH and Supplements from 1851, Building plans, Wills deposited.  
Clinical Sciences Library: Leicester Medical Society meetings—minute books from 1842.  
City Library local collection—newspapers and pamphlets  
Registrar of Births and Deaths—birth and death certificates

*National records*

Clinical Sciences Library, Leicester: *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet* from 1860 onward.

Wellcome Library, Euston Road, London: medical directories.

Nottingham Record Office: Probate valuation of wills from 1858.

William Johnston—his known published work

*A Report on the principal zymotic diseases during 1877* by Dr W. Johnston, Asst MOH, 76 pp.

*Annual report on mortality from zymotic diseases and infant mortality of 1878*. 67 pp.

*Report of the Asst MOH upon the infantile diarrhoea epidemic of 1878*. 8 pp.

*Annual report on the health and sanitary condition of the borough with quarterly and yearly tables of deaths for the years 1879–1884* by W. Johnston, Asst MOH.

(*Annual Report for 1885* by H. Tomkins, MOH—first half of the year figures compiled by W. Johnston.)

*The diarrhoea of Leicester: its causes and prevention* by W. Johnston FGS. Pamphlet 1876. 24 pp.

Summer diarrhoea: its native cause and treatment by W. Johnston, Asst MOH.

*Lancet* 1878; 2: 397.

Letters to local papers.

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## Adverse effects of drugs

Twenty-seven specific adverse reactions associated with 20 different drugs have been reported to the medical and pharmaceutical professions by the UK Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) in the last two years. In 17 of these there was no 'lag' between the time of the first major report of the adverse reaction in the literature and publication of a warning by the CSM. However, in the other 20 the lag varied from 0 to 5 years.

The 27 adverse reactions are analysed and the recent controversy surrounding the anti-inflammatory drug benoxaprofen is discussed.

The longest 'information lag' related to problems of coumarin anticoagulants and chondrodysplasia punctata, sodium chromoglycate and bronchospasm, aminocaproic acid and myopathy, and quinidine and granulomatous hepatitis. The authors also compare the situation in the United Kingdom with that in the United States and provide evidence to support the view that licensing procedures are longer in the United States, though recent regulatory changes there will affect this view.

Source: Twomey CEJ, Griffin JP. The information lag—has it improved? *Pharmacy International* 1983; 4: 57–61.

## MEMBERS' REFERENCE BOOK

The College has completely changed the format of the old *Annual Report* and has now produced a new reference book for members, which will appear annually. This contains not only the full report of Council, reports from faculties and financial accounts as before, but also for the first time the names and addresses of half the membership of the College. The second half will follow next year, and so a complete register will be available every two years.

The Reference Book also includes lists of regional advisers, course organizers, College tutors and faculty secretaries, and a number of special features such as a list of College policy statements. Current activities of the College are described and illustrated by photographs of places and personalities. In addition, the book contains a great many articles about different aspects of general practice written by well-known authorities in the field.

This large volume, comprising 450 pages, provides an invaluable source of information for all general practitioners. Copies can be obtained from the Publications Sales Department, Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU, price £17.50 including postage. Payment should be made with order.

## A HISTORY OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS The First 25 Years

This book records early attempts to form a College, the birth of the College itself, and the story of its growth through childhood to maturity. Edited by three distinguished founder members, John Fry, Lord Hunt of Fawley and R.J.F.H. Pinsent, it is a fascinating tribute to the enthusiasm, persistence and dedication of the men who made the College.

Written by those who were actually involved in its development, the chapters describe not only the story of the structure and organization of the College as a whole but of each of its component parts. Thus its involvement with medical education, standards, research and literature is described as well as relationships with other bodies at home and abroad—and a glimpse into the future.

Undoubtedly a success story, this account of the first 25 years of the College is recommended to those interested not only in the College but in the evolution of general practice itself. Copies can be obtained from the Publications Sales Department, Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU, price £10 to members, £12 to non-members, including postage. Payment should be made with order.