

# How to trace a practice tree

JOHN K. ROWLANDS, MRCGP  
General Practitioner, Maghull, Merseyside

**SUMMARY.** *Great pleasure can be gained from tracing the history of a general practice but at first sight such research may appear to have many unlinked starting points. This paper describes a logical method for tracing a practice tree, indicating guidelines and relevant sources of material.*

## Introduction

IN recent years several general practitioners have published the history of their practice and most have a surprisingly long pedigree.<sup>1</sup> No doubt they take great pride in the achievements of their predecessors, but the greatest pleasure must be in tracing their practice history with its many, often unexpected, discoveries. This paper describes a method of investigation and the sources of information available for tracing the ancestry of a general practice.

## General literature sources

It may help before starting the search to have some idea of how general practice has developed in the UK, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when medical qualifications became more widely recognized.<sup>2</sup> The professional and social standing of those who provided medical treatment to the community during this period varied,<sup>3</sup> and knowledge of this would be especially helpful when studying the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A general, but detailed description of health care during the nineteenth century is given by Smith,<sup>4</sup> while Corsi and Weindling provide an invaluable guide to source material.<sup>5</sup>

## Locality of the practice

The first step is to look around the practice area to see if it is likely that a medical practice has existed there for a long time. In cities and market towns this will probably be obvious, but even a new town may have an old village in its heart. A simple reference book could be useful for dating the local architecture, although even the most humble dwellings may have a date stone. A long established or previously existing hospital and in particular a dispensary would suggest a long medical history.

A visit to the local reference library and county record office<sup>6</sup> should be made for details of the history of the area, especially the medical history. At this stage it is only necessary to note the names and sources of reference of any doctors mentioned in case they should later fit into the practice tree. Although it is unusual to find published diaries of local doctors there may be diaries of local dignitaries and landowners who mention medical men. The accounts of landowning families, deposited in the record office, could give details of payments to doctors.

Having decided that there is evidence of a long established medical practice in the area it is necessary to create a list of doctors who practised in the area and who could have been in the investigator's partnership in its early days.

## Practice sources

The partners, both past and present, may be able to provide a start to the practice tree. Retired partners and employees will be able to give information about the practice when they joined and they should be encouraged to record as many details as possible. The relevant family practitioner committee can give the names, joining and leaving dates of all partners since the start of the National Health Service in 1948. Elderly patients who have spent all their lives in the practice area will often be able to supply the names of partners they remember, although these are often only their favourite doctors and they may forget those who stayed only for a short period. Some of the names which appear on the elderly patients' National Health Service record cards may be of value.

## Medical publications and archives

### *Medical directories*

At this stage medical directories become of great importance in the continuation of the search. The first copy of the present-day *Medical directory* was published in 1845 as the *London medical directory* and only covered the London area. In 1847 a provincial section which included Wales and the Channel Islands was introduced in the *London and provincial medical directory*. The *Medical directory for Scotland* was published in 1852 and 1854–60. The *Medical directory for Ireland* was published in 1852, 1854 and 1856–60, but there was no 1855 edition owing to lack of interest. In 1853 the Scottish and Irish lists appeared in the *London and provincial medical directory* and from 1861 onwards. The title became the *Medical directory* in 1870. Several libraries and institutions have a complete set, including the Royal College of Surgeons, the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine and the Liverpool Medical Institution. The *Medical register* was first published in 1859.

There are several other independent publications covering the period since 1845, which may appear in reference libraries. For example: *British medical directory* (covering England, Scotland and Wales); *Medical list* or *English medical directory*; *Kelly's London medical directory*; *Nisbet's medical directory*; *Medical who's who* and *London doctors and dental surgeons* (see appendix, no. 3).

For the period before 1845 the only comprehensive medical directory is the *Medical register* compiled by S.F. Simmons, for 1779–80 and 1783. The provincial section is arranged by counties and town but actual addresses are not given. The London section gives addresses and although the 1779 and 1780 issues are limited to members of the Royal College of Physicians, the Corporation of Surgeons and the Society of Apothecaries, the 1783 issue includes physicians and apothecaries not belonging to these bodies.

### *Professional qualifications*

The entries in the medical directories will probably give details of the doctor's qualifications and referring to the examining bodies should uncover many important biographical details. The examination books of the Royal College of Surgeons, dating from its foundation in 1800, are available for consultation at the college library. The books are arranged by examination date and under each date the examiner's name, the names of the candidates, which examination took place (membership, or examination for naval surgeons or surgeon's mates in the earlier years),

who passed or failed, and the fee paid are given; sometimes an address in the form of a town is also given. The college also has the examination book of the Surgeon's Company (its predecessor) for 1745–99 and the company lists of members for 1777–99. When the surgeons broke away from the Barber–Surgeon's Company in 1745 the earlier records remained in the possession of the Barber's Company and are now in the Guildhall Library in London.

In 1512 it became necessary for the diocesan bishops to grant licences to practices in surgery and medicine. Some of the records are still available in dioceses. The Royal College of Surgeons has two volumes of licences to practise from the registers at Lambeth Palace. They cover the years 1581–1775 and are in date order. The volumes were transcribed by R.R. James, and give some biographical details about the practitioners concerned.

Plarr's *Lives of the fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*<sup>7</sup> gives biographical details of the fellows and this can be useful as several fellows were general practitioners before the first world war.

The other royal colleges also have records giving details of their members. For example, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh have petitions for membership of fellows and members dating back to 1681, but little information is given in the early years. Latterly the member's petitions provide their date and the place of birth. The registers of licentiates contain the signature of the candidate and his place of birth. The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh records give few biographical details of fellows and licentiates. In most cases there is only the date of election, but in the case of licentiates who qualified after about 1851 the place of birth is given.

The records of the licentiates of the Society of Apothecaries for the period 1815–54 are held at the Guildhall Library in London and they contain a great deal of biographical information about the candidates. Some later records are in the custody of the clerk to the Society of Apothecaries. The entry books of qualifications of candidates, which are the main source of biographical information, cover the period 1815–88 and include the candidate's full name, date and town of birth, occupation of father, any apprenticeship, lectures attended (with the name of the lecturer), clinical experience and the name of the examiner.

### Apprenticeship records

To extend the tree to before the late eighteenth century is more difficult. In 1710 a stamp duty was imposed on the indentures of apprentices. The apprenticeship books up to 1811 are available at the Public Record Office at Kew. The records list the apprentice's name and address, the name of the father (up to 1759) and the trade of the master.

The school of education at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne has developed a project providing information on eighteenth century British medical practitioners from book subscriber's lists. They also hold a list of over 5000 apothecary apprenticeship records for the period 1717–68.

### General directories

The search can be continued by studying the local trade directories for each area which generally cover the period from 1780 until the second world war. These vary from area to area, but the *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales, excluding London, published before 1856*<sup>8</sup> may indicate which directories to use, while the London area is covered in *The London directories 1677–1855*.<sup>9</sup> Cities and large towns will have their own directories, but for rural areas the county directories may have to be used.

Local newspapers are an interesting source of information and may turn up some surprising, possibly non-medical informa-

tion about the doctors and their families. Unfortunately newspapers are not indexed and reading through them all can be a laborious task. Newspapers published since 1801 are available at the British Museum Newspaper Library at Colindale, and before that date at the British Museum. However, local newspapers may be in the local reference library or at the newspaper offices if they still exist.

### Parish records and maps

A search should now be made of the relevant parish records, which are usually deposited in the county record office. The surviving material available for each parish is so varied that the advice of the staff should be sought as to which material will be of most value in tracing eighteenth and nineteenth century doctors. It is advisable to leave a detailed search of the parish records until a list of doctors has been produced because some of the records for an early generation of doctors may have to be studied at a later stage to fill in the details of the more recent practitioners.

While in the county record office a study should be made of relevant maps for they may indicate doctors' residences when it was more usual to name houses than to number them. Victorian Ordnance Survey maps are particularly useful, but the parish tithe map of about 1840 and any earlier maps relating to land purchases can reveal surprising details which are often not recorded in writing.

Assuming that the investigator now has a list of doctors who practised in the area the next stage is to try and link them to one practice. This may be obvious if the doctors are listed as working in a partnership in a medical or local directory. However, it may be assumed that there is a link if they worked from the same address or if one doctor came into the area after another died or retired. More details about the doctors should now be sought.

### Family and social details

#### Census returns

The census returns for 1841–81 are available in the county record office, and are often found on microfilm in the local main library. They are an invaluable source of information giving details of the age and place of birth of the doctor and his family, although some guidance may be needed in their interpretation and in pinpointing the reference in large cities. The secret lies in finding the doctor's address in a directory published as close as possible to the date of the census. The family of the deceased doctors are often able to supply further details.

#### Obituaries

Obituaries, which may be found in local newspapers and medical journals, are a valuable source, not only of the doctor's medical achievements, but also of his role in the community and of his family and background. The doctor's date of death, which is an important reference point, may be found in the 'deaths' section of the *Medical directory*, by studying the parish registers, or by searching for his tombstone in the local churchyard or for a memorial in the church. Even if no date of death appears in the *Medical directory* the year in which the doctor's name disappears from the entries may be ascertained and this will narrow down the search of the obituaries in the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet*.

A complete list of references to obituaries and posthumous entries of practitioners, published in medical and scientific periodicals and related publications from 1750 to 1850, is being prepared by the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine.

Although the list is not yet complete a search can be made for a particular name.

### Wills

Wills and probate records provide an important further source of information. It is not possible to detail the method of searching wills here, but one must know where the doctor died and in which diocese his property lay. Lewis published a series of topographical dictionaries over the period 1831–46 which give details of the diocese of each parish. However, as there are exceptions it may be useful to refer to *Wills and their whereabouts*.<sup>10</sup> Some record offices have a full index, listing all wills published up to 50 years ago and giving the deceased's place of death and the date of probate. A copy of a will can be obtained from the record office or Somerset House in London.

### Other sources

The record offices may also have the local militia returns which were made annually after 1769 by the lord lieutenant to quarter sessions of all men aged between 18 and 45 years, naming those who were commissioned officers. It is possible that medical men may appear in the returns. The lists are also available at the public record office at Kew as are other naval and military records which cannot be detailed here.

Doctors also gave evidence to parliamentary committees and a search of their reports may give useful information.

A great deal of detailed information can be obtained from the accounts of the overseers of the poor, which may be in the record offices. The surgeons, their places of practice, as well as the parishes visited, their fees and methods of treatment of the poor may well be recorded. By this time a great deal of information will probably have emerged about the doctors, the practice and, perhaps, most importantly, the patients and the health of the community. There may have been hospitals, workhouses and nursing homes in the district which have long disappeared. The general practitioner may well have worked there and referring to the relevant records can be of great interest.

In recent years numerous local history reference books have been published,<sup>11</sup> and these indicate how the search can be extended to study the effect medical practitioners had upon the social and political as well as medical development of the community. There are also numerous publications available detailing the sources and method used in researching genealogy.

I have been able to trace two of the practices that I have been associated with back to the mid-eighteenth century (Rowlands JK. *The story of medicine in Maghull*. Unpublished).<sup>12</sup> However, I often wonder which is the oldest practice in the country? Perhaps the above description will enable someone to tell me.

### References

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### Address for correspondence

Dr J.K. Rowlands, Maghull Health Centre, Westway, Maghull, Merseyside L31 0DJ.

### Appendix

The following names and addresses may be useful:

1. Royal College of Surgeons of England, 35-43 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PN. Tel: 01-405 3474. Librarian: Mr E.H. Cornelius. Opening hours: Monday to Friday 10.00-18.00 hours. Closed bank holidays and throughout August. The staff will answer genealogical enquiries by post and visitors are welcomed. Professional genealogists must visit the library to consult the material held there.
2. The *Medical directory* is published by Longmans Group UK Ltd, Sixth Floor, Westgate House, The High, Harlow, Essex CM20 1NE. Tel: 0297-442601. Editions from 1965 are available. The staff are not able to reply to written enquiries, but visitors or their agents are welcomed. Earlier editions are held at Reading University: Professor J.A. Edwards, The Library, Reading University, White Knights, Reading RG6 2AH. Tel: 0734-875123. Opening hours: Tuesday to Friday 9.00-13.00 and 14.00-17.00 hours. The staff are not normally willing to undertake extensive research.
3. The Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP. Tel: 01-387 4477. Librarian: Mr E.J. Freeman. Opening hours: Monday to Friday 9.45-17.15 hours. The staff will reply to written enquiries and visitors are welcomed. The following issues of the *Medical register* are available: 1859, 1863-83, 1885, 1917, 1932-62, 1964-68 and 1974-75. The following editions are also available: Simmons' *Medical register* 1779-80 and 1783, *British medical directory* 1853-54, *English medical directory* 1857, *Kelly's London medical directory* 1896 (ran from 1889-1897), *Nisbet's medical directory* 1908-13, *Medical who's who* 1913-15 and 1925 and *London doctors and dental surgeons* 1923-24.
4. Guildhall Library, Aldermanbury, London EC2P 2EJ. Tel: 01-606 3030. Keeper of manuscripts: Mr C.R.W. Cooper. Opening hours: Monday to Saturday 9.30-16.45 hours. The staff will confirm in writing or by telephone the existence of relevant sources, but cannot normally undertake to carry out research.
5. Mr Peter Wallis, School of Education, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, St Thomas' Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU.
6. Mrs Jean Loudon, The Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, 45-47 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE. Tel: 0865-274600.

## Corrigendum

In the article 'Psychiatric screening in general practice: comparison of the general health questionnaire and the hospital anxiety depression scale' by M.J.B. Wilkinson and P. Barczak (July, p.311) the negative predictive values given in Table 2 for the 28-item GHQ, HAD and general practitioner should have read 84%, 93% and 70%, respectively.