Thomas Sydenham
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Thomas Sydenham is undoubtedly the most celebrated British physician. He has been considered the father of English medicine and the English equivalent of Hippocrates.1

Sydenham was born on September 1624 in Wynford Eagle, Dorset. He joined Magdalene Hall, Oxford at the age of eighteen to study medicine. However there was an interruption in his studies because of his participation in the Civil War as an army officer of the Parliamentary army. He graduated as Bachelor of Medicine in 1648 and in 1665 obtained license to practice in Westminster area by passing the examinations of the College of Physicians. He passed M.D., at Pembroke Hall (Cambridge) in 1676 (after a gap of almost thirty years !). Interestingly his eldest son was an undergraduate student at the same institution, at the same time.1 In between he had a second stint at military service. Around 1648 he had become a fellow of All Souls College. In 1665 he resigned to get married.2

Sydenham-the Physician

Sydenham followed Hippocratic methods. He revived them. Like Hippocrates, he emphasised accurate observations. He did not follow any traditional dogmas but believed in his own observations and bedside experience. He attached great importance to bedside experience. He was an original thinker.3 Sydenham studied diseases as they presented to understand the diseases completely. According to him each illness had a distinct character, permitting distinction of one illness from another. This he attributed to uniformity of cause of an illness. His observations, contributed to the understanding of natural history of acute and chronic illnesses. Sydenham had an opportunity to study London epidemics - the great plague of London and small-pox. Over the years he studied the yearly and seasonal variations of various fevers.2 Sydenham published his observations in books and letters. His book “Observations Medicare” was a standard textbook for two centuries. He is credited with first hand accounts of many diseases e.g. gout, scarlantina, malaria, dysentery, measles, hysteria. The treatise on gout is an example of classical medical writing, a masterpiece.

Sydenham made significant contributions, to therapeutics. He advocated Laudanum (tincture of opium) and Peruvian bark for the treatment of quartan agues (the modern equivalent of quinine and malaria respectively). About opium he said “Of all remedies it has pleased almighty God to give man to relieve his suffering, none is so universal and so efficacious as opium”2

Sydenham held care of patients, the first duty of physicians (lives entrusted to his care), a God given responsibility to whom one is answerable. He did his best for the patients. He advocated rationale therapy and believed in the curative power of nature.2

The power of observation, disease delineation, nosological method, therapeutics, patient care, ethics earned him the recognition as Father of English Medicine and English equivalent of
Hippocrates. The recognition, however, was accorded posthumously.

**Sydenham and Rheumatology**

Sydenham studied rheumatic diseases and (possibly) was the first to identify/describe discrete diseases. Prior to that terms gout and gouty diathesis were in vogue and applied loosely. In addition to the classical description of gout (of which he was a sufferer), he described and distinguished acute polyarthritis of the young, (possibly rheumatic fever), and a crippling deforming stage of arthritis (possibly rheumatoid arthritis). He named (rheumatic) chorea minor as, St. Vitus’ dance (to differentiate it from the dancing mania of middle ages) and noted its occasional association with arthritis.4

Sydenham died in London at the age of 65 years in December 1689. A mural slab was put up by the Royal College of Physicians in 1810. There is a stone dedicated to him that was put up by Sydenham Society on the staircase of St. Jame’s Church. The society is no more functional.2

**References**