

Doctor or Mister (the Correct Appellation of British Surgeons)

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The form of address for British surgeons — “Mister” instead of “Doctor” — has mystified other members of the medical profession for years. The author attempts to show that the designation “Mister” is neither an affectation nor a denigration but a natural consequence of the history of British barbering, barber-surgery and ultimately surgery, resulting from the advice and tutelage of King Henry VIII and Parliament.

Le titre donné aux chirurgiens britanniques, “Monsieur” plutôt que “Docteur”, continue, depuis des années, à laisser perplexes les autres membres de la profession médicale. L’auteur tente de démontrer que la désignation “Mister” n’est pas utilisée par affectation et qu’elle n’a pas de connotation péjorative, mais qu’elle découle plutôt de l’Histoire des barbiers, barbiers-chirurgiens et, ultimement, chirurgiens britanniques, conséquence de l’avis et de la tutelle du roi Henri VIII et du Parlement.

Surgeons from the United States and Canada visiting hospitals in Great Britain find it difficult to understand why their British colleagues are referred to as “Mister” and not “Doctor”. After many arduous years of study to acquire the much-coveted fellowship in surgery it can be disconcerting to address similarly qualified British colleagues by the seemingly lowly title of “Mister”. Actually, “Mister” is not a denigration, and British surgeons may even be offended if addressed as “Doctor”. But why the difference from almost universal practice?

Despite personal communication with the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of England (January 1987) and with the Wellcome Institute for the History of

Medicine (March 1987), I could not find documentation of the origin of this British custom. This appellation may have arisen from events that began when surgery and barbering were first recognized as arts and vocations in Britain.

After the dissolution of the Roman Empire, the little surgery that continued to be carried out in Europe was to be found only in monasteries,¹ where monks and their assistants, the barbers, carried on the almost forgotten art of surgery bequeathed to them by the Greeks and Romans. In addition to clipping hair and shaving, barbers helped the monks with more complicated tasks such as blood-letting, believed to be the origin of the colours on the barber’s pole — red stripes representing blood and

white, the bandages used for stanching.

In 1123 AD, Pope Calistas II decreed that monks must not shed blood. This ruling gave an extraordinary boost to the barbers who now performed, in addition to their regular chores, more complicated procedures such as tooth-pulling, blood-letting and treatment of fractures. Because of this, barbers now became known as barber-surgeons and, in keeping with the Pope’s orders, monks ministered only to the souls of patients; their guiding principle was *Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* (the Church abhors the shedding of blood).² Even so, they continued for a long time, as observers and advisers, to impart their superior knowledge of surgery.

Originating at about the same time as the barber-surgeons was a more exalted but less numerous group, the “pure” surgeons. They were more skilled than the barbers but were likewise unlettered, manual workers. They were apprenticed, not university trained and, unlike physicians, could not speak Latin. Because they had no university degree, they could not style themselves as “Doctors”.

In 1423, an attempt was made to improve the practice of medicine by forming a conjoint college of the university trained physicians and apprentice-trained surgeons;³ the barber-surgeons were excluded. The association survived only 1 year, probably because of the opposition of barber-surgeons who were afraid

Accepted for publication Dec. 16, 1987

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of losing their control of the field of surgery, or perhaps because of the tendency of physicians to look down upon the surgeons.³

In 1493, the surgeons decided to enter into a working agreement with the barber-surgeons regarding their respective spheres of influence in the practice of surgery and barbering.⁴ However, encroachment on each other's territory led to bickering. Surgeons were not above hair-clipping and barbers would occasionally dabble in surgery.

In 1540, Henry VIII, by act of Parliament, completed and extended the particulars, uniting the two groups under the name of the "Masters, Governors, of the Mystery and Commonalty of Barbers and Surgery of London".⁵ Henceforth, by royal edict, the barbers could engage only in barbering and the drawing of teeth; surgeons had to abstain from cutting hair and shaving. This association was maintained for over two centuries, until 1745.

The advantages of union were mutual. The surgeons, who were a more select body though fewer in number, helped to raise the prestige of the barber-surgeons. The latter group, more numerous and more affluent, had their own hall (the Barbers' Hall), where lectures were given in anatomy and surgery,^{4,6} thus perfecting and advancing the art of surgery.

King Henry VIII gave each member of the newly formed group the right to be addressed as "Master."

In time, according to the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, "Master" was pronounced "Mister".⁷ Skeat, in his *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*⁸ adds that "Mister" is a back-formation from "Mistress", the feminine for "Master". It seems, therefore, that when a British surgeon is addressed as "Mister" he is actually being honoured — in reality he is being called "Master".

The union of barbers and surgeons lasted until 1745 when the latter petitioned Parliament to effect a separation.

From this date, although they had been instrumental in reviving and spreading the knowledge of anatomy and surgery, the place of barber-surgeons was gradually taken over by surgeons. The barbers and barber-surgeons became an honourable, benevolent organization to which leading surgeons of England are now proud to belong. They hold bimonthly Court dinners and maintain the traditions of the old barber-surgeons. Only one-third of them are members of the medical profession. They are now a charitable foundation, dispensing bursaries for deserving boys and girls and pensions to retired barbers and to nurses in need. They provide study grants for the history of surgery. *The Cutting Edge*,⁹ a detailed history of the early surgeons, was written in 1974 by a non-medical member, Theodore R. Beck, who is an architect and antiquarian.

The original beautiful Barbers'

Hall was destroyed by incendiary bombs in 1940. It contained many treasures, including the painting by Holbein of King Henry VIII and the barber-surgeons. It was rebuilt and was reopened in 1969 by Her Majesty the Queen Mother who gracefully accepted honorary membership in the Worshipful Company of Barbers.¹⁰

With these romantic traditions stemming from a time when surgery in Britain was in its infancy, it is easy to see why British surgeons adhere tenaciously to the salutation of "Mister".

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