

Learning from Lister: Antisepsis, Safer Surgery, and Global Health

22 – 24 March 2012

King's College London

The Royal Society

The Royal College of Surgeons of England

'Joseph Lister almost single-handedly revolutionised modern surgery through his development of antisepsis, or so traditional accounts have stated.'

Lindsay Granshaw, 1992.



Joseph Lister (1827 – 1912), Professor of Clinical Surgery at King's College London from 1877 to 1893, is widely regarded as a founder of modern surgical methods and infection control. To mark the centenary of Lister's death, King's College London will convene a three-day multidisciplinary conference to reassess his achievements and legacy.

Lister's 'system' of antiseptic wound management, first articulated in 1865, was hailed by its originator as *the* cause of dramatic declines both in surgical mortality and hospital mortality from all infectious causes which took place in the latter half of the 19th century. Lister's approach spread rapidly, partly through his teaching and through deft patronage by its adherents, and has had long-lasting influence. Yet from the outset Lister's 'system'

which initially required elaborate carbolic dressings and subsequently use of the carbolic spray, faced challenging and sustained criticism from surgical colleagues despite its grounding, as Lister claimed, in scientific and empirical principles.

Between 1865 and 1900, the Listerian 'system' came to be modified, in a number of ways, by Lister and his interpreters as part of a widespread controversy involving rival surgical practices, falls in mortality in anti-Listerian hospitals, new cleanliness procedures, the development of germ theories, and better understanding of tissue healing. Some of the 'modifications' adopted by Listerians involved adaptation, others frank abandonment of central tenets of the 'system' as originally enunciated. Still others involved appropriation of the ideas, concepts and terminology of his opponents. The conference will explore the many facets of this controversy and take a balanced and comprehensive view, in order to re-examine Lister's theories, methods, life and legacies in light of recent scholarship.

Four major strands are envisaged, which will include papers arising from the study of History, Surgical Practice, Infectious Disease and Health Policy. The conference will provide an opportunity for historians, surgeons, nurses, infectious disease experts, health services researchers and those interested in the development of hospital health policy, translational practices, and hospital safety to discuss their respective approaches to understanding Lister's contribution to improved surgical and health care practice today.

The conference will take place across three venues: the Strand Campus of King's College London, the Royal Society at Carlton Terrace, and the Royal College of Surgeons at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Exhibitions of Lister's equipment, manuscripts and drawings will form a part of the conference, as will screenings of films about Lister, and London walks that visit the locales associated with Lister.

Papers are requested for 15- or 20-minute parallel sessions which could take the form of talks, workshops or seminars, to be followed by 10 minutes of discussion, covering (but not limited to) topics such as:

- Discipleship
- 19th and 20th C surgical craft
- Advances in surgical science
- Nursing pedagogy and practice
- Health care innovation
- 'Translation' of principle into health care practices
- Lister's legacy and global health
- Controversy in surgical sciences
- Identification and control of hospital infections
- Hospital safety
- Sepsis / antisepsis / asepsis
- Dirt / cleanliness.

Abstracts should be no more than 400 words, and proposals should state which of the four major strands they would be situated under (History; Surgical Practice; Infectious Disease; Health Policy) and sent to ben.chisnall@kcl.ac.uk. As well as historians, we welcome and encourage papers from scientific, clinical, and health service and policy backgrounds, which could cover modern-day bacteriology, asepsis, surgical techniques, and issues in healthcare. These papers should make reference to Lister's legacy, and should be concerned with tracing the roots of this legacy into present-day practice.

The deadline for receipt of papers is **Friday 16th September 2011**. For a full programme, please visit the Lister website at www.kcl.ac.uk/lister.

Contributions will be selected by peer review and collected in a scholarly volume that will offer a major reassessment of Lister's legacy. For further information about this conference, please contact Ben Chisnall, Centre for the Humanities and Health at King's College London: ben.chisnall@kcl.ac.uk, 020 7848 1405.