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MEDICINA IN AERE

A HISTORY OF HEALTH IN MEDALS, COINS AND TOKENS

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Matters of medicine and health have been described as “the greatest of all earthly blessings” by the numismatist, Seth William Stevenson¹. As such, health was and remains of great importance to all societies. It is not surprising that medical themes are extensively recorded in the numismatic record. The Aesculapian staff with entwined serpent (reverse) and the head of Aesculapius (obverse) was struck on a Greek coin of the Mysian mint at Pergamum between 200 – 133 B.C.²; and Salus, the Roman goddess of health, features prominently on many of the gold and silver coins struck by the tyrant Nero (37-68 A.D.). Aesculapius himself appears with his name engraved on a fine bronze medallion struck at the Rome mint under the reign of Antoninus Pius (86 – 161 A.D.)³.

Today, medals and medallions are often struck by medical institutions to create a lasting memorial of a deceased professional colleague. This practice is a latter-day continuity of a practice begun in ancient Greece in the 6th century B.C. One such example, of a medallion interred in the mouth or hand of a dignitary of high birth has been unearthed from the Punic civilisation at Carthage; and was excavated from the Carthage Necropolis in 1895⁴. Since time immemorial, coins have been placed in the mouths of the deceased, as the payment for the ferrymen to bear the subject across the rivers of the underworld to the lands of the hereafter.

Coins and medals form the most endur-

ing of all memorials. They remain the only historical vestige of evidence of some civilisations of the unknown past; and in many instances will become the only surviving material artefact of a person’s life or an event. Christopher Eimer, in his authoritative *British Commemorative Medals* defines a medal as “an object of handy proportions conveying a passage of time or moment of expression”⁵. Such “moments of expression” of the evolution of the health sciences and of those who have partaken in them thus forms the numismatic medical record.

One classification of medical numismatics⁶ categorizes the pieces as:

1. “Beloved physician” medals.
2. Medals commemorating medical events.
3. Medals commemorating and highlighting medical science.
4. “Medical” coins.
5. Miscellaneous medical themes.

Illustrative examples are presented in the following accounts.

“Beloved Physician” Medals

Thousands of physicians have been portrayed on medals. Such include the internationally famous such as Osler⁷, Freud, Purkinje and Schweitzer⁸. Medals portraying Jonas Salk, the pioneer of poliomyelitis immunisation and the figure of Joseph Pancoast (of Pancoast syndrome fame⁹) have been available over-the-counter from the United States Mint¹⁰. The delight of “Beloved Physician” Medals, however, comes

from the spontaneity and creation by local regional medical groups honouring in aere perennius a local doctor whose service and contributions are deemed to be of great local significance. They form a memorial and a memory which survives by the efforts of his or her peers and professional colleagues, perpetuating one which might otherwise be lost (Figure 1).

Arabic physicians preserved much of Greek and Roman medicine during the Dark Ages. Physicians such as Ahmed Ibn al Jazzar (898-980 A.D.) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna: 980 – 1037 A.D.) are recorded in the medallic record (Figure 1). Ibn al Jazzar was the most famous teacher of the world's oldest School of Medicine, the Medical School of Kairouan, in Tunisia, circa 890 A.D.¹¹ (Figure 2).

Many physicians are commemorated in the numismatic record not primarily for their contributions to medicine, but for other service. Such include the explorers David Livingstone and George Bass, the latter the Royal Navy Surgeon who (with Matthew Flinders) first established that Van Diemen's Land was an island and not part of the Australian mainland. Others include political leaders and governors whose primary profession, but not their fame, was that of medicine. Such include Georges Clemenceau (in France) and Sir William MacGregor (in Australia)¹². "Beloved Physicians" are also commemorated for their philanthropy and benefactions as in the case of the Sir Hans Sloane, the founder of the British Museum. Several medallions commemorate his life and works. One of these was cast by Wedgwood¹³; and another is the currently-available metal medallion issued by the British Museum and first sold in 1997^{14,15} (Figure 3).

France, Italy and Germany particularly in the 19th century issued many medals in honour of their medical heroes¹⁶.

Other "Beloved Physicians" are just that. Several of the most famous who have been so honoured served their fellow inmates during the horrors of degrading captivity in both Nazi and Japanese prison camps during World War Two. One such was Janusz Korczak (also commemorated on an Israeli 1962 postage stamp)¹⁷ who perished with the children in his care under unthinkable circumstances in a Nazi concentration camp. . Another was the war surgeon, Colonel (later Sir) Edward "Weary" Dunlop (1907-1993) commemorated both in the Weary Dunlop Asia-Pacific Medal¹⁸ and on an Australian fifty cent coin¹⁹.

Medals Commemorating Medical Events

Several thousand medals record the milestones of health, particularly those of local significance. The opening and commissioning of hospitals, national and international medical conferences and medical discoveries have been marked throughout the world by the striking of commemorative medallions. Because of the effort and expense of striking a medal or striking a medallion, their issue is conservative and always important. Their collection defines what contemporaries have regarded as signal events in the progress of medicine^{6,8,16}.

The foundations of new medical institutions are very important; and often after the passage of time, the importance of an institution's first tentative steps can be seen in clearer perspective. Medical institutions which develop vigour, success and a "feel of outreach" often wish to establish the symbolism of their record in bronze. Thus many

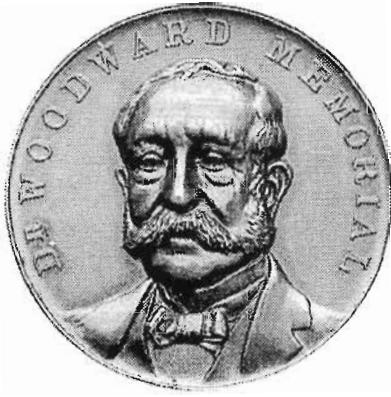


FIGURE 1A. The Obverse of the NSW Railways and Tramways Ambulance Corps Medal – a bronze medal awarded for competition in ambulance skills. It portrays the frontal effigy of Dr Woodward, formerly of the Corps. This medal, struck by W.J. Amor of Sydney, is his memorial.



FIGURE 1B. Reverse of the Woodward Medal (Figure 1A) depicting a central ambulance cross (St George or Greek Cross style) with a stylised southern cross constellation surrounded by a laurel wreath. Medals (Figures 1A and 1B) courtesy of Mr. George Snelgrove FANS, President, the Australian Numismatic Society (Qld Branch), with grateful acknowledgements.



FIGURE 2. The Ibn Al Jazzar Medal issued by the Tunisian Society of the History of Medicine. Issued to Executive Members of the International Congress of the History of Medicine, conducted by the International Society of the History of Medicine, Carthage, Tunisia, September 1998. Ibn Al Jazzar was the most famous teacher of the world's oldest School of Medicine, The Medical School of Kairouan, Tunisia, *circa* 890 A.D. A medal of gilt cupro-bronze, ovoid 90mm x 70mm, rimmed. Medal presented to the author.



FIGURE 3. The Sir Hans Sloane Medallion, issued and sold by The British Museum from 1997, to raise money for the Museum's work of outreach. Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), a highly successful London physician, exerted perhaps the greatest influence in science in Europe of his day. He is the only person to have been elected President both of The Royal College of Physicians (from 1719) and of The Royal Society (from 1725).



FIGURE 4. *The obverse of the John Thomson Medallion, awarded annually by the Trustees of the Queensland Military District of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps – for exemplary service to military medicine. It portrays the profile of Colonel John Thomson (1847-1909) founder of military medicine in northern Australia. Medal engraved by Mr. Mirek Zymslowski of Brisbane and struck by A.J. Parkes Pty Ltd of Brisbane. The medal (60mm x 5mm, rimmed) is commercial pewter, with added bismuth, nickel and copper.*



FIGURE 5. *The penny token issued by "Professor" Thomas Holloway, to advertise his patent medicines. These "coins" circulated widely in Great Britain and the colonies in the era from 1857 until the 1920s. The Reverse depicts Hygieia with the Aesculapian snake drinking from a patera. The patera was the libation vessel used during religious obeisance to the god and goddesses of medicine and of health, especially to Salus in Roman times. The patera became a major emblematic symbol of health depicted on medals and tokens struck in the 19th and 20th centuries.*

medals have been struck to commemorate the origins of medical institutions. Such are awarded to individuals, usually on an annual basis, as acknowledgement of service to the institution. Dr Mervyn Cobcroft and I have identified more than 120 of these in Australia alone. The Royal Colleges of Medicine¹⁶, university medical schools, medical professional associations and institutions of military medicine (Figure 4) all establish permanent records of their endeavours by such medallic awards.

Medical Science

Many medals have been issued to record the datum milestones of great discoveries to the betterment of health of all humankind. The discovery of the clinical uses of penicillin²⁰ and the discovery of the teratogenic effects of rubella²¹ are two such examples.

In 1948 an international CIBA Symposium listed a series of medals from many countries struck to commemorate successes in the fight against famine, pestilential diseases and smallpox²².

“Medical” Coins

Many hundreds of coins portray the effigies of doctors, the fight against disease and a miscellany of medical themes.

Ancient coins portray Hippocrates, Galen and Xenophon, the latter the physician to the Roman Emperor Claudius²³. Roman coins in particular feature Salus, the goddess of health²⁴. The German surgeon, Christian Theodor Billroth (1829-1894) is portrayed on a 1929 Austrian two-schilling coin, as was Robert Koch (1843-1910) on an East German five-mark coin of 1968⁸.

The effigies of many doctors appear on coins not to record their medical contributions but to honour their political or civil service. Examples are the Canadian John McLaughlin portrayed on a British Columbian half dollar²⁵; and the extensive Philippines coinage depicting the patriot, Dr Jose Rizal. Surgeon George Bass is portrayed not as a surgeon but as an explorer on a 50 cent Australian coin issued in 1998²⁶. Captain James Cook (1728 – 1779) is featured on many stamps and coins, including the 50 cent coin issued in 1970 to commemorate the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia. In 1776 Cook was awarded (in absentia) the Copley Medal of The Royal Society, not for bringing notice of the existence of Australia and New Zealand to the western world, but for his work on scurvy prevention²⁷. Sir James Pringle, President of The Royal Society and a founder of the discipline of preventive medicine, gave the highest praise to Cook for his medical accomplishments. In his paper, published in the Transactions of The Royal Society in 1776, Pringle published “A Discourse Upon Some Late Improvements of the Means of Preserving Health of Mari-

ners”. In it, Pringle spoke of Cook’s greatest achievement:

“If Rome decreed the Civic Crown to him who saved the life of a single citizen, what wreaths are due to that man, who, having himself saved many, perpetuates in your Transaction [of The Royal Society] the means by which Britain may now, on the most distant voyages, preserve hundreds of her intrepid sons, her mariners...”²⁸

In the nineteenth century, throughout many of the British and American Colonies, there was insufficient coinage in circulation to satisfy the monetary demands of business and of commerce²⁹. A number of penny “tokens” were privately minted, particularly at the Birmingham Mint, to satisfy this need. These tokens looked like coins, many with milled edges. Such penny tokens were made of copper or bronze alloys identical to those of the coins which they resembled. They circulated widely and functioned as coins³⁰, in spite of being declared illegal in many colonies. Victoria outlawed them in 1863. The most famous “medical” tokens were those issued by “Professor” Thomas Holloway. His penny token extensively advertised Holloway’s Pills and Ointment (Figure 5)³¹. These circulated widely throughout the United Kingdom and the British Colonies from 1857 until the 1920s.

Miscellaneous Medical Medals

Matters of medicine and of health are all-pervasive in society. Many aspects of pharmacy and pharmacology, preventive medicine and of medical treatment have been permanently recorded in medals, badges, token, banknotes and coins.

Many Medallions have been issued by the St John Ambulance Association, this award

being a certification of high competency in both the teaching and practice of first aid. The St John Ambulance Association was instituted on 1st July, 1877, initially as a Civilian Reserve for the British Army Medical Department³². It was established by the drive and efforts of Surgeon Major Peter Shepherd who was based at the Woolwich Arsenal, south of the Thames. His “Handbook describing aids for cases of injuries or sudden illness”, first issued in 1878, was to become one of the great English “best-sellers”. Within one year of its issue one hundred thousand St John first aid certificates had been issued throughout the United Kingdom and the British Colonies³³.

The medals and medallions issued by The

Royal Humane Society, The Order of St John, The Red Cross and The Royal Life Saving Society themselves form a record of society’s promotion of all that is best in volunteer prehospital care of the sick; and of the care of those who are distressed or injured.

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