Vis Unita Fortior – united strength is stronger

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2020 will see not only the 75th anniversary of the foundation of BAUS, but also the centenary of the Urology Section of the Royal Society of Medicine. Clearly, it will be a year that sees many celebrations in British urology. Here, Jonathan Goddard looks back at the origins of these two august bodies.

The recent meeting of the European Association of Urology in London included a celebration of the history of British urology, with a whole morning dedicated to lectures by expert speakers and a fascinating display of historical artefacts spanning 300 years of the specialty. However, the consolidation of urology as a distinct specialty in Great Britain was late in coming. Urology, of course, has been practised for time immemorial, the stonecutters – travelling lithotomists – being the earliest surgical specialists. Urological surgery, though, was swallowed up into the lexicon of the trained and qualified surgeon during the 18th century and, in the UK at least, it was a long time escaping.

THE FIRST UROLOGISTS

Many surgeons made their names by demonstrating particular skills in urological surgery or taking an interest in the diseases of the genitourinary organs and their cures. In the 18th century, the name of William Cheselden stands out as the finest lithotomist (Figure 1). He advanced the ancient art of perineal lithotomy by the application of the science of anatomy, such that his mortality rate was as low as 6% in his first 100 cases, with his record operating time allegedly only 54 seconds.\(^1\) In the 19th century, Sir Henry Thompson was noted for his skills at the blind manipulation, crushing and extraction of bladder stones with the new modern lithotrite (Figure 2). Eventually, he confined his practice almost exclusively to surgery of the lower urinary tract, and his name has been put forward as the first British urologist.\(^2\) But neither Cheselden

\(^1\) Vis Unita Fortior – united strength is stronger

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Figure 1. William Cheselden (1688–1752) was reported to have performed a perineal lithotomy in under a minute. Image courtesy of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons
GETTING TOGETHER

Medicine is an art, surgery is a craft, and both require skills to be constantly honed by learning. Surgeons with an interest in urology were keen to share their ideas, and it is therefore not surprising that associations began to appear where urologists could do just this. These, however, began not in Britain but abroad.

The American Association of Genitourinary Surgeons was formed in 1886. The first national urology society, the Association Francais d’Urologie, was founded in France in 1896, followed by the American Urology Association in the USA in 1902, and national associations in Germany and Russia in 1907. The French once again were forward in setting up an international association, the Société Internationale d’Urologie, in 1907. Reginald Harrison of St Peter’s Hospital, London, was a founder committee member; the London surgeon Edwin Hurry Fenwick was an early mover and was president of its second meeting, held in London in 1911.

In 1913 Fenwick attempted to form a Urology Section within the Royal Society of Medicine (RSM). The RSM was formed in 1907 by the amalgamation of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society of London and several other smaller societies. It was suggested that urology form a subsection of the Surgery Section along with orthopaedics and proctology, but an initial lack of momentum and the outbreak of the First World War put a halt to this.

After the Great War, Walter Spence, president elect of the RSM Surgery Section, looked once again at urology. A subcommittee was formed in 1919, and in 1920 urology was given the status of a full section of the RSM. The first meeting of the Urology Section was held on 17 March of the same year, and its first president was Sir Peter Freyer.

SIR PETER FREYER

Freyer worked at St Peter’s Hospital, London. He was a colourful figure and a great self-publicist, well known for his operation of enucleation of the prostate. In his presidential address, he mapped out the vast advances in urology over the previous 45 years. He also made it quite clear that he was a little surprised that not only had urology been recognised as a specialty, but that it had been granted significant status with a full section, marking a ‘healthy advance of the surgical world in England’. Pushing the point a little, he noted that this was already the case in ‘every other country’. Freyer felt the section would create a ‘healthy and friendly rivalry’ between urologists, allowing them to co-ordinate their work, and leading to a ‘favourable influence in continuing the progress of urology’.

Freyer was right: the RSM Urology Section became the focus of British urological practice. As well as the annual president’s address, there was a meeting of short papers on the medical and surgical aspects of urological disease and a clinico-pathological meeting, with one meeting a year to be held outside of London.

The early presidents of the section included physicians (Sir Thomas Horder in 1921 and Sir Walter Langdon-Brown in 1923) with an interest in urological conditions, and pathologists (Cuthbert Dukes in 1956 and Roger Pugh in 1976) as well as urologists. Presidents came from hospitals outside London, including Scotland (Sir Henry Wade in 1937) and Wales (TE Hammond in 1940). It was perhaps for this reason that no national British urology society was formed, as although heavily London-influenced, the RSM Urology Section fulfilled that purpose very well.

THE BIRTH OF BAUS

Following the Second World War, the Labour government began the task of creating a ‘cradle to grave’ national health service. While war was still raging, plans were already being drawn up. Ronald
Ogier Ward (Figure 3), a urologist and brigadier in the Royal Army Medical Corps, helped to draw up the 1944 government white paper. Alongside Walter Galbraith in Scotland, Ward realised that, to be included in the plans, urology needed strong representation. He therefore rallied a group of urologists together with the intent of forming an association that would represent all British urologists.

On 11 December 1944, Ward, Farquhar Loughnane, Terence Millin, Clifford Morson, Eric Riches, RHOB Robinson and Winsbury White met at Eric Riches’ London house and planned ‘an association to promote the general interests of the practice of urology.’ They wrote to 29 surgeons with an interest in urology and met again on 22 January 1945. Encouraged by the positive responses, an inaugural meeting was arranged at the Royal College of Surgeons of England on 17 March 1945, chaired by Sir Alfred Webb-Johnson, president of the college. 37 members were present and Ronald Ogier Ward was elected as the first president of the new British Association of Urological Surgeons (BAUS). The first annual BAUS meeting was held on 29 June 1945 and the annual subscription (which included subscription to the British Journal of Urology) was £1.5s.0d.

BAUS continues to fulfil its original mission statement, ‘to promote a high standard in the practice of urology,’ and to address the issues of urological manpower in the NHS and the training of urologists.

The motto of BAUS on its coat of arms is Vis Unita Fortior, which translates as ‘united strength is stronger’, a reminder of the struggle of urologists to be seen as a separate specialty in Great Britain.

Declaration of interests: none declared.

REFERENCES
3. Innes Williams D. The development of urology as a specialty in Britain. BJUI 1999;84:587–94.