

Essex Hospitals before the NHS; some C19th hospitals

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Report by Richard Todd

Jane Pearson explained that her current area of interest was the development of medical practice in Colchester particularly during the 19th century and she proposed to share some of her thoughts about this topic rather than talking about Essex Hospitals more generally. The establishment and development of a Voluntary Hospital in 1820, originally known as the Essex and Colchester Hospital, later as the Essex County Hospital, was an important event and she posed three questions:

Why was a hospital thought to be necessary?

How did the general public view the hospital?

To what extent did the hospital influence the development of medical practice in the Colchester area?

Prior to 1820, and for many years afterwards, indeed well into the 20th century, wealthy patients would be treated in their own homes, even when an operation was required. The poor, if they were seriously ill, for example with smallpox, might be admitted to the local Pest House provided by the parish and paid for from the rates; the new Voluntary Hospital was intended principally for their benefit.

Jane referred to the History of Essex County Hospital written by the late Dr. John Penfold and published in 1984 in which he gave details of the founding and subsequent progress of the hospital, the initial purchase of part of the military hospital, which was being demolished, and of a piece of land on which to re-erect it, the subsequent appointment of staff and the establishment of a comprehensive set of Rules concerning the admission of patients and the conduct of patients and staff. The hospital was funded by a combination of donations, subscriptions and bequests.

She made the point that the enterprise was undertaken, and initially paid for, by a group of eight local men of independent means (no women were involved, except later on as hospital visitors or as organisers of fund raising events) and she argued that their motives were not necessarily entirely philanthropic. There was a large element of self interest, in that as employers they were providing medical and nursing care for their workers to enable them to return to their duties with minimal delay. Her justification for this somewhat provocative view was that, except in a dire emergency, acceptance for admission to the hospital as either an out-patient or an in-patient depended on the recommendation of a subscriber, by definition likely to be someone of the wealthier classes, though parishes and villages did subscribe on behalf of their residents. Moreover certain categories of patient were excluded, those with the means to provide for their own care, pregnant women, children under seven, patients with any infectious disease and the terminally ill. Effectively the hospital was to be for the benefit of the working poor but only for those who had a reasonable expectation of recovery. The founders were also careful to ensure that the management of the hospital remained under the control of them and their successors, and not the doctors.

She also expressed the view that the strict Rules of behaviour demonstrated that apart from providing medical and nursing care there was the unstated intention to inculcate good habits of discipline and time-keeping in patients during their stay. It was for example expected that in-patients would work in the hospital, according to their capabilities.

Regarding the attitude of the general public to the hospital she drew the inference from contemporary inquest and newspaper reports that it was viewed with suspicion and that, at least in some quarters, it was seen as being for the benefit of the doctors, to enable them to experiment on patients, and of medical students.

The doctors appointed to the staff of the hospital gave their services free but any individual did not necessarily spend a great deal of time on hospital work and such an appointment presumably brought benefits in the way of enhanced professional status and good reputation among wealthier potential patients from whom they earned their living. Medicine was, after all, a competitive business. The Colchester Medical Society, the second oldest in the country, founded in 1774 and still in existence, undoubtedly used the hospital and its patients as a teaching resource but this probably helped to improve the care of patients, and to foster good relations and more collaboration between doctors. On occasion it also facilitated the exercise of some disciplinary function.

Jane recounted a number of episodes, some reflecting badly on the hospital and doctor concerned, others showing them in a more favourable light. Her conclusions were that the establishment of the hospital was a means of "exercising control of the poor", that it was viewed negatively or at least suspiciously by the general public but that it did enhance the development of medical practice in the area.