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Perinatal lessons from the past

‘Is there anything whereof it may be said,
See, this is new?
It hath been already of old time,
Which was before us’

Ecclesiasticus, 1, 10

In 1963 the late Professor A V Neale of Bristol read to us from William Smellie’s famous *Midwifery* (1752) during a ward round. For me this was the start of a voyage of excitement and delight into medical history. It is in the hope that others will be stimulated to share this pleasure that the Editors agreed to my preparing a series of articles of which the first concerns James Blundell and neonatal resuscitation (p 494). My purpose will not be confined to illustrating the accuracy of the quotation from *Ecclesiasticus* shown above. I hope also from time to time to reveal the truth of a remark made by Sir Robert Hutchison during his Harveian Oration in the Royal College of Physicians in 1931:

‘Look round this room in which we are met. It is a noble library indeed, but is it not also a mausoleum? And how many facts which men are at present hunting for, and theories which are even now being put forward as new, lie already buried in these shelves’.

The importance of a knowledge of medical history is also clearly drawn in the following lines written in 1925 by that wise paediatrician, historian, and philosopher, Dr John Rührh of Baltimore:

‘The unread physician is like a man in the theater without a program or a libretto or often, perhaps,

without even a knowledge of the language of the stage. He is like a deaf man at an opera. Someone who has been watching the play before he came in may tell him something about it; who the principal characters are; who it is that sings so sweetly, so convincingly. He may gain a slender knowledge of the plot from what the actors say or do, and that is all. The jester enters, makes a loud noise with an empty bladder on the end of a stick, tweaks the nose of the king or his chancellor, cracks his time-honored jest and vanishes amid the laughter and applause of the delighted, if uninitiated, audience. Character after character appears and disappears, most of them the same old familiar faces, though sometimes with new names and new costumes. The auditor gasps and wonders. A timid voice speaks a great truth, but no one pays attention and presently the stage manager pulls the speaker from the stage while the clown and the trained dogs hold the attention of the audience.

A century or two later, the same truth is told again, but now the spotlight is on the handsome actor, with a wonderful voice, mouthing his nothings most delightfully. Again the audience pays no attention, but after many repetitions, the stage is set for Truth and, amid great applause, some one or a group parade Her with great pomp, as if for the first time. The audience gasps again and asks why She was not brought out before: so wonderful She is! Had he but known, had he paid attention—he had heard it long ago, but Now it is the wonderful, new thing. But perhaps it was not on the stage while he was in the audience. Well, it was set down in the account of the play, but he was too indolent, too busy, or else too lazy to read it.’

P M DUNN