

George Johnston

Born: 1814
President: 1880 -1882
Died: 1889

George Johnston was born in Dublin on 12 August 1814. He was the third son of Andrew Johnston and Sophie (nee Cheney). Andrew studied at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland graduating in 1794. In 1813 he became Professor of Surgical Pharmacy and in 1819 Professor of Midwifery. For many years he was Treasurer of the College and was elected its President in 1817.

George Johnston was educated at Trinity College Dublin from 1830. He was awarded Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons in England in 1837 and subsequently studied in Paris and at Edinburgh University where he obtained MD in 1845. In February 1843 he married Henrietta Williamson; they had four sons and two daughters. Following his return to Dublin, he was Physician to the Dublin General Dispensary between 1840 and 1850. He served as Surgeon Superintendent to the emigration commissioners for the Southern Australian colonies and was Consulting Physician to the Whitworth Fever Hospital in Drumcondra.

Johnston was awarded a Licentiate from the College of Physicians in 1852 and was elected a Fellow in 1863. He was appointed Assistant Master to Robert Shekleton at the Rotunda Lying-in Hospital (1848-1851). In 1858 he published *Practical Midwifery: comprising an account of 13,748 deliveries which occurred in the Dublin Lying-in Hospital during a period of seven years, commencing November 1847*. The statistical account, using contemporary methodology, was an attempt to calculate maternal mortality at the hospital. However, mid-nineteenth century identification of causes and classification of mortality depended on unscientific principles and were not an accurate analysis of the causes of deaths in childbirth.

Johnston was appointed Master of the Rotunda in 1868 at a time when unacceptably high maternal mortality rates due to puerperal fever were recorded. Evory Kennedy (qv), former Master and Governor of the hospital, was among a growing body of international obstetricians who, confounded by the level of mortality in lying-in hospitals despite the many measures taken to avoid infection, began to question the hospital system. Kennedy proposed a radical remodelling of the hospital suggesting the erection of thirty small cottages in the Rotunda gardens. This, shortly before the germ theory of disease was fully accepted and the introduction of carbolic soap into obstetrics, he believed would facilitate proper cleansing and ventilation between each admission. Johnston rejected the theory of the contagious nature of puerperal fever and at a meeting of the Dublin Obstetrical Society in November 1869 argued that other contributing factors, which made women more susceptible to disease, caused mortality in the hospital. He cited the practice of never refusing relief to any patient who came to the hospital in



labour, for example mothers who were under the care of unskilful practitioners outside who, 'after trying all their efforts to effect delivery without success' sent them to the hospital in 'a hopeless state'.¹ Johnston promoted the use of the midwifery forceps in many cases intervening during the first stage of labour before the *os uteri* was fully dilated, to prevent the danger of the mother contracting puerperal fever that might arise from prolonged labour. He was strongly criticised by many of his peers when the complex issue of this intervention was debated by the Dublin and London Obstetrical Societies in the late 1870s².

Johnston's tenure as President of the College of Physicians from 1880 to 1882 coincided with the appointment of Charles Cameron as Medical Officer for Health for Dublin. One of his first initiatives was to form a 'death-rate Committee' in collaboration with the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland 'with respect to the joint action of the two Colleges on the present high death rate in Dublin'³. Sanitary reform was a priority for both Colleges particularly as it was the custom for Government to refer legislation which necessitated medical consideration for approval before enactment. Important and significant legislation was debated by the legislative committee of the College during Johnston's term. In February 1881 the College was asked to consider the second reading of the *Infectious Disease Notification (Ireland) Bill* which was before Parliament at the time. It found the bill to be 'objectionable in its details and incomplete in its scope' recommending that it should be amended by a parliamentary committee⁴. The bill was eventually enacted in 1889.

Johnston made several contributions to the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*. He continued in private practice from his home, 15 St. Stephens Green, Dublin, where he died on 7 March 1889.

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¹ George Johnston, 'Fourth clinical report of the Rotunda Lying-in Hospital for the year 1872', in *Proceedings of the Dublin Obstetrical Society for session 1872-73* (Dublin, 1873), p. 32.

² 'On the use of forceps and its alternatives in lingering labour', in *Transactions of the Obstetrical Society of London for the year 1879*, vol. xxi (London, 1880), pp 121-146; 171-198; 201-218.

³ *Journal of the Kings and Queens College of Physicians in Ireland*, vol. 17 (3 December 1880), p. 295.

⁴ *Journal of the Kings and Queens College of Physicians in Ireland*, vol. 17 (6 May 1881), p. 345.

