

Jonathan Osborne

Born: 1794
President: 1834-1836
Died: 1864

Jonathan Osborne was born in 1794 in Cullenwood House, County Dublin. He studied medicine in Trinity College, receiving his MB in 1818. The following year he was admitted a Licentiate of the College of Physicians and in May 1823 was elected a Fellow. He served as President for a two-year term from 1834. In his professional career, he worked as Physician in Ordinary to Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital and at Mercer's Hospital. In 1840, he was appointed King's Professor of Materia Medica and Pharmacy.

Shortly before Richard Bright, physician at Guy's Hospital, London, first associated albuminuria with granular degeneration of the kidneys in oedematous patients, Osborne reviewed the contemporary state of knowledge of nephrology. He credited Hippocrates with the observation that the qualities of the urine are altered by the intake of food and drink. In 1820, citing Blackwell, Osborne stated that 'dropsical urine sometimes presents a coagulation on application of heat or metric acid'. Until then dropsy (oedema) was considered a disease instead of a symptom of an underlying abnormality. Bright's important discovery, in 1827, that albuminuria indicated the presence of granular degeneration of the kidney was promptly and widely recognised, and stimulated considerable interest in nephrology.

Albuminuria became synonymous with Bright's disease, but Osborne questioned the reliability of this association. He demonstrated that coagulated urine could be associated with a wide range of conditions both in the normal patient, and in other allied conditions. Interestingly, another President, Robert Graves (qv), also questioned the universality of the association of albuminuria and Bright's Disease. More importantly Osborne, in 1851, attributed albuminuria to inflammation of the kidney, appropriately termed nephritis, when his contemporaries considered Bright's Disease to be a degeneration. Although he incorrectly attributed the pathogenesis of the renal disease to impaired perspiration, he had an early nineteenth century state of the art understanding of glomerular nephritis.

Osborne remains the doyen and, very much, a forgotten man in world nephrology. In the bicentennial publication *Richard Bright: A man of many parts* (Bristol, 1989), no reference is made to Osborne's contributions to renal disease, and he is not listed with the great contemporary physicians. The list, however, included the College Presidents Dominic Corrigan (qv), William Stokes (qv) and Robert Graves (qv).



Osborne was remembered as a kind and jovial man, an excellent lecturer, an enemy of puffing and for his wry sense of humour. He once protected himself from a leaking roof with an umbrella, observing to the class he was teaching that ‘This, gentlemen, is the accommodation which the board think good enough for the professors of the School of Physic’¹. Outside of medicine he had an extensive knowledge of the classics, speaking both Greek and Latin fluently. He combined his interests in published articles identifying the poison given to Socrates as hemlock, and reflecting on the plague described by Thucydides.

A sufferer from rheumatism, Osborne walked with two sticks and insisted that he would be buried standing up so as not to be disadvantaged at the resurrection. He died on 22 January 1864 and was buried in St Michan’s Church. In accordance with his expressed wish, his coffin was placed upright in the vaults of the Church.

JABK

¹ James Little, “Jonathan Osborne, M.D., President RCPI,” *Dublin Journal of Medical Science* 519 (1915), 163.

