Gaining Credit: The Growth of Surgery in 17th Century England

Abstract:

Knowledge formation was highly contested in early modern England. As historians like Mario Biagioli, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have noted, knowledge’s value was linked often to the social value of its creators. Surgical practitioners, maligned for their hands-on and empirical ways of knowing, were thus relegated to a lower rung (than physicians) on the hierarchy of medical practitioners. At its heart, this paper asks how surgeons sought to gain trust in an era where trust and epistemological legitimacy were linked closely to reputation and social standing. How did seventeenth-century surgical practitioners, though tradesmen, improve their standing?

Throughout the seventeenth century, but especially the latter half, surgeons benefited substantially from the transition to a Baconian natural philosophy that foregrounded empiricism, experience, and experiment over the ancient medical theories espoused by physicians. The Scientific Revolution had come to the surgeons. This new focus on experiment helped decrease the stigma against hands-on learning, dissections, and direct contact with diseased bodies necessary to surgical practice. Ironically, surgeons were now gaining further social and occupational credit for something they had long practiced. Due to institutions such as the Royal Society, and through print in treatises and the scientific journal, surgeons could now associate and collaborate with physicians and natural philosophers as part of formal and informal learned communities. Here, surgeons increased primarily their “horizontal honour” – that is, credit amongst their peers – and were accepted increasingly into learned bodies.

Coupled with this, and perhaps because of it, surgeons were also able to advance – gaining funds, patients, and positions – through petitions, patronage, and friendship with physicians and natural philosophers. Epistololary became increasingly an important method of seeking and dispensing favour. Many surgeons sought favour though informal personal and institutionally mediated patronage relationships. These men acted as intermediaries and clients for patrons who possessed cachet in both the medical and social spheres. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the most successful surgeon-clients were using deftly their connections to gain social and professional advancement – several eventually join the ranks of physicians.