

History of Edinburgh Clinical Pharmacology and Toxicology

Edinburgh has a long history of improving the practice of medicine. The Edinburgh Royal Colleges of Physicians and of Surgeons were involved in producing the Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia in 1699. After numerous revisions, this is now enshrined in the British National Formulary (BNF). As plants were the source of medicines in the 18th century, the Chair of Materia Medica at the University of Edinburgh emerged from the Chair of Botany in 1768. It was the first to be created in Britain and one of the first of its kind in the world. At that time Professor William Cullen gave a series of lectures on Material Medica, which were published as Lectures on the Materia Medica in the mid 1780's, later to become A Treatise of the Materia Medica (1789) which was widely read across Europe. By 1918, the Chair of Materia Medica had been held by only five professors. Among these was Professor Sir Robert Christison, Bart (1832-77) and his pupil, Professor Sir Thomas Fraser (1877-1918), both distinguished clinician scientists, who, between them, occupied the Chair for no less than 86 years, and undertook internationally recognized work in pharmacology and clinical toxicology. In 1918, two separate Chairs were created, recognizing the separate identity of human pharmacology and its key clinical link to therapeutics.

The Christison Chair of Therapeutics and Clinical Pharmacology, based in the Royal Infirmary, and the first of its type in the world, also has a distinguished record. Postholders include Jonathan Meakins (later Chair of Medicine, McGill University) and David Murray Lyon (later Chair of Medicine, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh). They were followed by Prof Sir Derrick Dunlop, first Chairman of the Committee on Safety of Drugs [later to become the Committees on Safety of Medicines (CSM) and Human Medicines (CHM)] who set up the Yellow Card Scheme for reporting of spontaneous adverse reactions to drugs, and then Prof Ronald Girdwood. The chair was re-established in 1995 when Professor David Webb took up the post. The Chair of Pharmacology has also had a distinguished record, being held by Arthur Cushny, AJ Clark, Sir John Gaddum, Sir Walter Perry, Bernard Ginsborg, John Kelly and, most recently, Tony Harmar.

A further legacy of the work of Professors Christison and Fraser was an interest & international expertise in clinical toxicology. In response to Government and local physician concern, a poisons clinical unit and a poisons information service were established at the Royal Infirmary in 1963. Previous Directors have included Dr Henry Matthew, Dr Alex Proudfoot, Professor Nick Bateman and Prof Michael Eddleston. The unit holds world renown as the place where acetylcysteine was developed as an antidote for paracetamol overdose by Professor Laurie Prescott in the 1970s. Other work at the time changed the management of aspirin poisoning by showing the lack of efficacy of forced diuresis. Alex Proudfoot initiated the world's first computerized system for providing information to enquirers about the management of poisoning (TOXBASE); following developments in 1998-99 that put it onto the world wide web, it now acts as the basis of the UK's poison information services and is used by clinical toxicologists worldwide. The unit moved to the New Royal Infirmary site in 2005 and is the busiest unit of its type in the UK and one of the busiest worldwide. Dr Euan Sandilands is the current director.