William Hunter Biography

William Hunter

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Biography

The Scottish anatomist and obstetrician William Hunter (1718-1783) was instrumental in improving the practice of obstetrics and establishing it as a medical discipline.

William Hunter was born on May 23, 1718, near East Kilbride, Lanarkshire. At the age of 13 he entered the University of Glasgow to study theology, but after 5 years there he decided instead to study medicine and became an assistant to William Cullen, a well-known physician. Hunter spent 3 years with Cullen, attended the University of Edinburgh for a year, and in 1740 went to London, where he studied with James Douglas, who encouraged him in anatomy, and William Smellie, from whom he developed his interest in obstetrics. Hunter decided to teach anatomy and opened a series of private lectures on anatomy and surgery in 1746 in London. He was a popular and respected teacher.

While teaching, Hunter was also engaged in obstetrical practice. In 1747 he was appointed assistant to the accoucheur at Middlesex Hospital, and in 1748 he became surgeon-accoucheur at the British Lying-in Hospital. Before Hunter, obstetrics had been the domain of the midwife, but his skill and methods helped elevate the discipline to a respected practice in medicine. In recognition of his achievements he was awarded a medical degree by the University of Glasgow in 1750. His fame led to his appointment as physician extraordinary to Queen Charlotte in 1764 and as professor of anatomy at the newly opened Royal Academy of London 5 years later.

In the mid-1760s Hunter outlined a project for a museum to improve the teaching of medicine, surgery, and anatomy through illustration. This museum was opened in London in 1768 and contained natural-history specimens, medals, and a fine library of rare books as well as anatomical and pathological specimens. Hunter published on many subjects, including fossil elephants, but his most famous work is the handsomely illustrated *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774), which includes accurate descriptions of the parts of the uterus and of the placenta. Together with his brother John Hunter, he also charted the system of the lymphatics. John was a surgeon who achieved greater fame than William, and although the brothers had studied and worked together, they became rivals and were embroiled in many disputes over priority of discovery.

William Hunter died on March 30, 1783. He gave his museum into trusteeship to be given to the University of Glasgow.