

William Pulteney Alison (1790–1859)

His name will be known to some from the College's eponymous prize in community medicine and to all with an interest in social medicine. William Pulteney Alison was a zealous pioneer in that field.

Little is known of his early years. He was privately educated, then studied medicine at Edinburgh University (and climbed Mont Blanc during a vacation), graduating MD in 1811, a few years after the height of the Edinburgh Enlightenment. His appointment as physician to the newly created New Town Dispensary in 1815 was seminal for his academic and campaigning career. It was there that he saw at first hand the poverty, squalor, deprivation and infections that so troubled him and many citizens in the years to follow.

Alison's academic career started in 1820 when he was appointed to the Regius Chair of Medical Jurisprudence, to be followed two years later by the Chair in the Institutes of Medicine (physiology, pathology and therapeutics) from 1822 to 1842, during which time (1836–38) he was also President of the College. From 1841 to 1855 he occupied the Chair of Medicine. Some of his lecture notes for 1828 and 1830 still exist, covering pathology and the physiology of the blood and circulation. They look as though they were dictated, which was not uncommon at that time.

His lectures were summarised in two publications, *Outlines of physiology* (1831) and *Outlines of physiology and pathology* (1833). One thing Alison taught his students was 'the peculiar value of observations made on large and organised bodies of men as in the experience of military and naval practice' – what we would today call statistics. His recognition of the value of statistics is also evident in his recommendation for better death certification.



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At that time, during an economic depression and inflow of poor from the country, both Edinburgh and Glasgow had higher death rates than London. It was estimated that in Edinburgh 10% of the population were, again to quote Alison, 'destitute, overcrowded, cold, hungry and demoralised... subject to lethal outbreaks of fever'. Another of his famous aphorisms was: 'Unrelieved indigence saps the morality of the poor.' It was an era of typhus, cholera and tuberculosis.

The disgrace of this situation was widely recognised. Rev. Thomas Chalmers, who led the secession from the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church of Scotland in 1843, believed the answer lay in 'parochial provision for the poor'. He had already successfully persuaded his Morningside congregation to give their money and time helping the poor around Edinburgh's West Bow, and now planned to build no fewer than 60 new churches, with each of their congregations being responsible for some of the city's poorest districts. Not only did this dream come to nothing, but on Chalmers' death so did the work in the West Bow.

The Poor Law Commissioners believed the answer lay in more efficient drainage and sewers. In his 1840 publication *Observations on the management of the poor in Scotland and its effect on the health in the great towns*, Alison argued that the government and its agencies had a major role in the alleviation of poverty and that this undertaking should not be left to religious groups or private charities. He advocated using public taxes to help the unemployed poor and criticised the establishment for ignoring those who were fit but impoverished.

The Poor Law Commissioners challenged Alison to prove his claim that 'filth without destitution was safer than destitution without filth'. However, the findings of the 1844 Royal Commission on Poor Laws (Scotland) lent support to Alison's viewpoint.

Basing his arguments on statistics and clinical experience with Edinburgh's poor and underprivileged, Alison won. He was able to convince the lawmakers that health and socio-economic matters cannot be separated, and in so doing challenged his students and medical colleagues to keep under review the ever-changing boundaries and goals of medicine. By 1845 much of what he had proposed had passed into statute and he had been appointed first Physician to the Queen in Scotland and had become a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

After being a professor for 11 years Alison married his cousin, Margaret Gregory, the daughter of medical professor James Gregory, in 1832. They had no children and she predeceased him. Between 1855 and 1856 Alison suffered epileptic fits and remained unwell until his death in 1859.

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