



The Oxford Medical Companion Second Edition

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When the first edition of this encyclopedic guide to medicine appeared in early 1986, the *Lancet's* somewhat flippant short notice said, "Over 1000 biographies of medical men and women; 5000 short entries; 150 major entries on selected topics—it must be the *Oxford Companion to Medicine*." And so it was — two volumes of 1524 pages, edited by Sir John Walton and Dr Paul Beeson, but conceived some years earlier by Sir Ronald Bodley Scott, who died before the *Companion* was hardly more than a series of topical headings.

In preparing the second edition, John Walton was joined by Stephen Lock, former editor of the *British Medical Journal*, and Jeremiah Baroness, a distinguished American practitioner of medicine and President of the New York Academy of Medicine. These three (Paul Beeson had retired) enlisted the help of a large and distinguished group of experts in a wide variety of fields to write the informative, longer articles. The result is a one-volume edition of 1,038 pages that should continue to serve as a most useful

reference guide to all aspects of the very broad field that we call medicine.

As compared with its predecessor, the second edition has some longer individual articles and bigger (but fewer) pages. This edition has nevertheless retained much of the material and of the flavor of the first. It is still primarily directed at an Anglo-American audience, but the editors seem well aware of the increasing emphasis on the broad cultural aspects of medicine and the comparative perspective. To accommodate this broad viewpoint, they have added a very informative group of articles on medicine in various countries and regions of the world.

Thus, if you are interested in conditions in the former Soviet Union, for instance, you can quickly see how many hospital beds (3,832,000), physicians, and middle-level medical personnel there are in each of the states. Under the heading "medicine in Japan," you can read that surgical costs are one-quarter those in the United States because the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare controls doctors' fees and all other medical costs. Even so, the overall cost of medical care in Japan is climbing. These regional articles will prove very useful as starting points for study; each is accompanied by appropriate references.

From Abbott (Maude, a Canadian physician) to Zygote, with thousands of entries between, this is a formidable reference book. The articles and short entries are generally very much up-to-date. Many of those retained from the previous edition have been revised. An example is Dr J. C. Snyder's discussion of public health in the United States. Here, even the late, lamented, laminated Health Security Card held up by President Clinton in a speech to a joint session of the Congress makes an appearance.

The editors' allocation of space and choice of what to drop, keep, and add is, however, somewhat of a mystery. It is not surprising that this edition includes a fuller discussion of AIDS. But after an informative 3 1/2 pages on "chest medicine," is it really necessary to have a separate two-line entry on "chest physician"?

Furthermore, users of this guide must sometimes branch out beyond simple alphabetical searching. There are several articles on medicine and literature and physician-writers, but they will not be found under L for literature or M for Medicine. Instead, they appear as "doctors as truants to literature" and "doctors in literature." In the discussion of physicians who were writers, the article mentions only three Americans: Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Carlos

Williams, and Walker Percy. Given the revived popularity of the medical essay, one would think that such widely read writers as Lewis Thomas and Gerald Weissman (to mention but two) would also merit inclusion. Ironically, it was Dr Thomas who wrote the review of the first edition of the *Companion for Nature*.

In general, though, the cross-referencing is adequate. Thus, the lay reader who wants to look up "heart attack" is sent to the citation for "coronary thrombosis," as is the physician who looks under "myocardial infarction." Both are then directed to the longer articles about heart function and disease.

With continuing public debate on both sides of the Atlantic about the availability and the adequacy of health care, the public's understanding of what medicine, in its broadest sense, is all about becomes increasingly important. We encounter growing discussion of medical problems in our newspapers and magazines, on television and radio. But the information from these sources is ephemeral — a charge that obviously cannot be made against a reference guide such as the *Oxford Companion*. Although continuing change in disease conditions or in the knowledge necessary for the practice of medicine can soon make even an intelligently conceived and executed guide such as this one seem dated, and new editions thus inevitable, the *Companion* includes the broader social, economic, and philosophical aspects of medicine, along with the biological, and thus should stay useful in many ways for some years to come.

Students can find material for term papers, and teachers for writing their lectures; and anyone who wishes to look up a date or a definition, to understand a medical or biological concept, or to grasp a historical trend can turn to this useful compilation. It is, obviously, difficult to confine 'medicine' between two covers, but the editors of this engaging volume have probably come as close to accomplishing the feat as we are likely to see. The new edition, in one volume rather than two, contains far more than half the information of the earlier one. That the publisher has cut the price in half, however, should make this a popular gift and a good companion for many of us.

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