Allbutt’s Clinical Thermometer
Making Diagnosis Easier

What was the Allbutt Clinical Thermometer?

By the nineteenth century, doctors recognised the importance of recording the temperatures of patients. They had begun to link extremes of temperature with specific illnesses. Despite this, the thermometer remained an inconvenient, large and cumbersome instrument. The Allbutt Clinical Thermometer was the first practical device for taking temperatures. It could be easily carried around large hospitals and gave rapid, accurate readings. This version became an indispensable diagnostic aid, joining the stethoscope in the doctor’s armoury.

The Allbutt Clinical Thermometer was around 6 inches long, and contained mercury. It resembles very closely the thermometers of today.

Dr Clifford Allbutt’s Short Clinical Thermometer (Self-Registering)

This particular example is held at the Thackray Museum, and has “Harvey & Reynolds Leeds – Patent” engraved on it. It was far smaller than previous thermometers, making it portable for doctors and nurses.

Allbutt initially persuaded the Leeds-based company Harvey & Reynolds to manufacture the thermometer, which was advertised to the medical profession through trade catalogues. It was taken up quickly by doctors throughout Britain. Although he sold and marketed the thermometer, Allbutt made the design widely and freely available.
Who was Allbutt?

Sir Thomas Clifford Allbutt (1836-1925) is one of Yorkshire’s most celebrated physicians. Born in Dewsbury, he trained in London and Cambridge, and moved to Leeds, where he worked at the Leeds General Infirmary for twenty years. It was during this time that he devised the clinical thermometer.

After the demands of hospital practice, Allbutt spent a brief period as a consultant to London asylums. He then took up the prestigious Regius Chair in Physic (medicine) at Cambridge, which he held until his death in 1925.

Apart from his invention, Allbutt’s other major contribution to medicine was his eight-volume collection, *A System of Medicine*, which was published between 1896-1899. This became one of the most widely-used sets of medical textbooks in Britain.

**Sir Thomas Clifford Allbutt (1836-1925)**

Allbutt invented the clinical thermometer. He was one of the most important doctors of his generation.

How did Allbutt use patents?

It is very difficult to tell! The Thackray Museum holds an example of an Allbutt thermometer which is marked “patented”, but it seems that Allbutt himself never took out a patent. The most likely patent holder was the instrument manufacturer J. J. Hicks, who made thermometers and other glassware for Harvey and Reynolds. Hicks built up a prestigious business,
was very keen on patenting medical devices, and supplied Harvey & Reynolds during the 1870s. At the Thackray Museum we have some correspondence between Hicks and Harvey & Reynolds, which makes it clear that Hicks began making thermometers in around 1873. The Allbutt Clinical Thermometer at the Thackray dates from around this time, so it is highly likely that it was made by Hicks.

The word “patent” was engraved onto the side of the thermometer. It may have had two separate purposes. In the first place, this may have assured doctors that this particularly thermometer was accurate and trustworthy. But it could also have made patients feel more comfortable knowing that the device used to help diagnose them was patented.

Allbutt’s name on the thermometer also lent the device great credibility. The fact that it was known as “Dr Clifford Allbutt’s Clinical Thermometer” gave further reason for users and potential purchasers to place faith in the device.

J. J. HICKS & H. PINCHETTI.
CLINICAL THERMOMETER.

J. J. Hicks & H. Pinchetti Thermometer Patent (1891)
Hicks patented a number of improvements to the clinical thermometer in the 1890s. It is likely that he manufactured the earlier Allbutt thermometer using one of his own patents.