

**On the present position of dental surgery, and its advancement as a branch of medical education : a letter addressed to Dr Robert Omond, president of the Royal College of Surgeons / by John Smith.**

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ON  
THE PRESENT POSITION  
OF  
DENTAL SURGERY,  
AND ITS ADVANCEMENT

AS A BRANCH OF MEDICAL EDUCATION:

A LETTER ADDRESSED TO DR ROBERT OMOND, PRESIDENT  
OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS.

BY  
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## LETTER, ETC.

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- TO THE

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS.

SIR,

IN submitting to you, as President of one of our greatest medical licensing bodies, the following remarks on the present position of Dental Surgery, I would direct attention to a subject which, insignificant as it may appear, has long been undeservedly, although, I fear, almost altogether neglected by the generality of medical men.

In commencing, let me state that the object of the subjoined observations is twofold: *First*, Toward urging the claim which dental diseases and their treatment—unimportant as the matter may be—have to a place as one of the auxiliary branches of study in our different medical schools. And, *second*, Toward advancing the position and qualifications of those who assume the exclusive practice of this special branch of surgery. And let me also here anxiously guard against the error of being understood as implying anything whatever derogatory to those numerous respectable practitioners in this line, whom an imperfect system of legislation, and the want of any imperative, or even of any definitely provided course of in-

struction of this kind, may have placed in circumstances which might otherwise seem to be irregular.

No one conversant with or taking any interest in the circumstances of this sectional department of medicine, can be unaware of the amount of arbitrary practice which at the present day is associated with the treatment of dental disease; and yet, while we find an outcry raised against irregularities in all other branches, dentistry—which constitutes perhaps the most familiar example we have of surgical practice, sometimes to a serious extent, adopted without surgical qualifications—is overlooked, and regular and irregular practice here apparently not only indifferently regarded but even indiscriminately sanctioned by the medical profession. Whether, then, we regard the welfare of patients, or the intelligence and status of practitioners, the advantages to be anticipated from more attention being directed to this subject, as a minor branch of medical study, are both manifest and numerous; as there seems little reason to doubt that, were more information on the matter generally possessed by medical men, more importance would be recognised as attaching to dental diseases, much error and absurdity in their treatment would be swept away, and better qualifications would be found for undertaking the practice of dental surgery, than is at present the case.

The teaching and practice of dental surgery has of late attracted a somewhat unusual amount of attention, and apparently begins to have accorded to it that share of consideration which its importance and its present circumstances really demand. At various periods within the last few months, the columns of our different medical periodicals have, from time to time, been occupied with the subject, more especially as regards the *education and qualifications* which would appear desirable in those numerous individuals who adopt this branch as a special and exclusive calling. A deficiency of some systematic mode of instruction, and a want of any definite qualifications among those undertaking the treatment of dental disease, have of late been pointed out, and different proposals advanced with the

view of improving matters in this direction; and it is profiting by the opportunity thus presented, that occasion is here taken briefly to examine, what generally is the *education* at present received by or required of dental practitioners; what are the *qualifications* consequently prevailing among and recognised by them as sufficient for undertaking the treatment of dental disease; and what *means of improving matters*, in this respect, are left at our disposal.

With reference to the education at present required of or received by dentists, the fact that, owing to many obvious circumstances, dentistry must always be considered and practised as a distinct and special, if not exclusive, department of surgery, exercises an important influence. As dental surgery, properly so called, almost unavoidably entails a certain proficiency in mechanical dentistry, so, on the other hand, mechanical dentistry is necessitated, in many instances, to combine with it the performance of certain surgical operations; and it is in this necessary combination of the two departments, that much of the difficulty has arisen, and is still found to exist. Here, perhaps, more than in any other case, the qualifications for practice have become arbitrary, and, consequently, vary according to the opinion, the intelligence, and, it may be, the honesty of the practitioner; no definite criterion exists, by which the proficiency or fitness for undertaking such practice, or for assuming a so far surgical title, can be ascertained. Accordingly, the system of education now very commonly adopted in the training of dentists, is little more than the mere apprenticeship demanded for undertaking the mechanical part of the business; a few opportunities for extracting teeth; the acquirement of a purely empirical knowledge of some of the diseased conditions of these organs; and an equally empirical knowledge of some modes of treatment pursued in them, is perhaps added; but this may be considered as the full extent of instruction received by much the greater proportion of dental practitioners of the present day. No acquaintance with the physiology of the structures themselves; of the pathological nature of their diseases; or of the principles upon which the treatment of these diseases should

be conducted or is established, seems to be considered necessary, and is, consequently, seldom or never possessed by such as merely receive this kind of education.

Now, it is by no means to be able merely to relieve toothache or extract a tooth, that ought to be the limits of surgical qualification possessed by dental practitioners. Connected with the subject of dentistry, and unavoidably interfered with by the dentist, we have even the diseases of childhood during dentition,—which if not caused by are at least all intimately associated with this process, and the beneficial results of a more extensive acquaintance with which diseases, as directly and indirectly connected with dentition, is perhaps only yet to be ascertained; we have those affections common to the teeth and mouth in after life; and what is more important still, we have their indirect evil results, in many cases so much more serious than the primary disease itself; these, and in connection with them the value of an acquaintance with the pathology and diagnosis of tumours, abscess, various forms of neuralgia, dyspepsia, etc.; all demand that instruction in these matters should be comprehended in the education of the dentist, as it becomes of the utmost importance that the detection and treatment of such diseases might, at least where the circumstances should so require it, be with safety and confidence committed to his care.

It may be thought that this is conferring undue importance on such a branch of medicine as dental surgery. But no sectional departments of medicine can be with safety set down as unimportant; we may isolate them from the relations they bear to the science, considered as a whole, and in that way hide from ourselves and fail to recognise their worth; but, in truth, they are all links in one great chain of facts; each has its own place; and the value it possesses lies, not so much in itself, as in its connection with those other facts to which it is related; and so it is with regard to the pathology and surgery of the dental system.

As the natural result of this defective method of instruction, so generally pursued by dental practitioners, we find the amount of

surgical qualifications among them to be correspondingly deficient. The very mode of education thus open to, and by many regarded as adequate for practising, in this line, is in itself an excuse for, and more than an excuse, it is the reason of this want of sufficient qualifications in many who undertake the treatment of dental disease. Those who cannot see that such education is insufficient, surely must be regarded as only thereby illustrating the danger of a little knowledge. It is exactly this mistaken view of the matter, which leads to such an amount of instruction being here so frequently considered sufficient to confer a right to assume the title of "*surgeon.*" In no case is this title more abused or more irregularly assumed, than it is by dentists; the terms *surgeon-accoucheur*, *surgeon-oculist*, *surgeon-apothecary*, invariably imply, that the possessor of any of these titles has obtained a surgical diploma; but to state that one half of those who assume the title of *surgeon-dentist*, do so without any such warrant at all, is to speak at least within the mark.

But, apart from the benefit of an increased acquaintance with the subject before us to the practitioner himself, even the very limited extent of knowledge existing on many points in dental surgery, demands some improvement on other grounds. A very imperfect conception of many simple matters connected with dental surgery, it must be admitted, prevails not only among dental practitioners, but also among some otherwise fully qualified medical men. This becomes at once obvious, if we reflect how little is generally understood either of the physiology or pathology of the teeth; how much ignorance prevails regarding their mode of development and their successive stages during dentition; how comparatively few practitioners, notwithstanding the very familiar manner in which the subject is every day talked about, would undertake to give anything like a scientific or correct *resumé*, however short of the process of dentition, even in its healthy state; or to describe correctly its different stages during infancy and childhood; the various epochs at which its most ordinary phenomena occur; far less what the pathology of its disorders



really is at all; and yet, where is the practitioner, where is the dentist, who will not undertake its treatment from beginning to end? How many instances are met with where the anomalous nature of the diseases, to which the teeth are liable, and the modifications of treatment required in them, are known only in the most vague and imperfect manner,—how many cases where even the number of teeth which should exist within the mouth, at any given age, is scarcely any better understood. While, as for the amount of pretence and quackery, at the same time, attaching to dentistry as practised by many such imperfectly qualified individuals,—that may be satisfactorily ascertained by a glance at the advertising columns of most of the leading newspapers of this and almost every other country.

Under the existing circumstances, however, little if any fault can be found with such as undertake the treatment of diseases connected with this branch of surgery, without having received any competent surgical education. On the contrary, this proceeding on their part, in the existing state of matters, appears warranted and quite justifiable; unless a better system of education is provided for dental practitioners than at present exists, or some regulation be enacted so as to ascertain a certain amount of fitness for this profession, no alteration or amendment in this respect can be looked for.

The general feeling of the dental profession itself, however, is most certainly that at least *some* more adequate means of instruction, especially in the physiology and surgery of the teeth, would be most desirable; and there is no doubt that the superiority even of a complete surgical education, did circumstances permit of it, is by many equally well recognised and admitted. Beneficial as might be even a partial surgical education, specially in this branch, as proposed in some quarters, and difficult as it is to find a remedy at once sufficiently mild and yet sufficiently powerful for the present exigencies of the case, any such limited mode of education does not really strike at the root of the matter; and this will be more and more clearly perceived, according as a greater amount of knowledge is imparted, and dis-

closes to a greater extent the importance of the subject. Indeed, in most cases where any such full qualification being required in dental practitioners is objected to, or considered out of place, it is in the circumstances of the case, and not in the conviction of further instructions being superfluous, that the objection consists. And this feeling is quite excusable: however desirable it is that those who undertake the treatment of dental disease should possess a surgeon's diploma, it would require time to bring a proposal of this kind into anything like general operation—and any measures, or legislative enactment, unless in no way retrospective, which might at one stroke demand such conditions of existing practitioners, would undoubtedly be oppressive, and be of a most injurious instead of a beneficial tendency. That is not to say, however, but that this were it practicable, is the preferable and the most consistent—indeed the only legitimate method, of setting matters right in this case. Those who embark in the study and practice of medicine in any form, must not each one respectively be competent for only one duty, and for that one duty alone; but each man must be able and ready in the hour of danger—an hour which sometimes overtakes the simplest as well as the most formidable operations—each man must then be ready to renounce his favourite or his allotted post, and bear a hand wherever and at whatever he may be wanted. Thus in dental practice serious consequences, and even fatal results, occasionally follow such simple operations as are comprehended within its sphere; and of late more than ever are there certain risks to be apprehended in the performance of such operations; since the introduction of chloroform for example, patients very naturally, and very properly, demand its administration previously to undergoing any painful remedial measures; and although this agent may quite possibly be again and again administered with impunity by the most ignorant, yet how can we be certain that all the resources of the most fully qualified medical man may not here be demanded at a moment's notice?

It is however the creditable spirit of the age in which we live, not to inquire, as such a mode of reasoning as this would imply, how

little knowledge will be sufficient for our purpose, but rather to discover how much it is possible to obtain : and it is encouraged by the recollection of this fact, that I venture on the present remarks. Thus, time was when diseases of the eye, diseases of the ear, diseases of the skin, were no doubt recognised and treated by physicians, well enough, —as they supposed,—long before such branches were made the subject of special instruction. Then, these branches also, were in all probability regarded as of far too little consequence to merit being separately studied ; but as their subjects by such means became better understood, the necessity for more attention being bestowed upon them, was more and more clearly perceived. And now, with our advanced knowledge in such branches, what should we think of any one who, this day, should assert that this increased attention to such subjects, had done no good : was useless and superfluous : and that no necessity existed for it ? Unfortunately, however, dental surgery has not only failed to advance along with other sectional departments of medicine ; its position has not even merely remained stationary ; but its movements as a line of practice have been positively retrograde. Neglected by the general practitioner, while of almost universal and hourly occurrence, and of a nature most troublesome to patients, disease connected with the dental system has thus naturally enough been seized upon often by the mere adventurer—has been taken out of the surgeon's hands as a branch for which he is virtually incompetent—and is attempted to be set up as an entirely isolated profession with which legitimate surgery has no call, if it have any right, to interfere. The result has followed as we know, that while in other diseases the attention of men whose education is adequate for such a duty, is being directed to diminishing the frequency of their occurrence, rather than towards their cure,—disease of the teeth has been relinquished by, and meets with no attention from such inquirers, and prevails as much, and is understood as little as ever.

The question then principally concerning us here is,—How are those evils to be remedied, and how is the position of dental surgery,

as a special line of practice, to be elevated from the place it now occupies ?

There seems to be no doubt that the obvious means of accomplishing such ends consists in requiring of, and providing for practitioners in this branch, a better system of education in surgery than at present exists. Two methods may be found for carrying this into effect, namely, First, that every one adopting the practice of dental surgery should be required to possess a surgical diploma or other equivalent qualification, and have any special education in dentistry superadded to this. Or, Second, that at least a limited and special course of instruction, practical as well as theoretical and elementary, in dental surgery, should be afforded, and considered imperative on such as might not possess, or might not feel desirous of obtaining, a regular diploma.

Were it practicable, there is no question that the really legitimate qualifications for undertaking surgical operations, or other treatment for dental disease, would be the possession of some such degree as is required of other surgical practitioners. But difficulties lie in the way of attaining this object, as we have already remarked ; and some preliminary, or intermediate arrangement might perhaps require to be adopted in the first instance, and which might, in the meantime, prepare the way for the more desirable and complete qualifications being ultimately introduced. The most likely arrangement, according to this view, seems to be that inculcated in our second proposal, namely, that some limited and special instruction in surgery, as applicable to dental disease, should be acquired by dentists : by such means a more extended knowledge on this part of the subject, would be conferred upon those who choose to avail themselves of the advantages thus provided ; and without holding out any such inducement as that of obtaining in this manner, a pseudo-medical degree, or title—always a dangerous acquisition—there is little doubt that many would take advantage of such an opportunity, that much benefit would in this way be the result, and an essential service be done to those who are intending to follow out the practice of this line. But such an amount of education as this, we say, could

not of course be expected to entitle its possessors to anything worthy of the name of a surgical diploma; such partial degrees are in every way reprehensible—being not only from their incomplete and fractional nature, inconsistent and absurd in themselves, but liable to be perverted from their original and proper intention, and to be made the means of deception—a cloak under which the work of charlatanism might be carried on with more convenient seeming, and which might serve as something like a warrant for practice of a far wider extent than ever was originally contemplated in conferring them. Let those who consider it desirable or advantageous to qualify themselves as really *surgeon-dentists*, obtain a *bona fide* surgical diploma: let those who consider this immaterial or unnecessary, have in the meantime, at least a better opportunity than generally exists, of acquiring some elementary or epitomised notions of physiology, pathology, and treatment, as applicable to dental disease, rather than that error and maltreatment in dental practice should so much prevail. This, we say, might serve as a preliminary step to further improvement in the same direction. Such instruction has long been in England, and could easily be anywhere superadded as a systematic and recognised although optional branch in the usual course of study in all our medical schools; and, while it might thus be of service to such as merely wished to become somewhat conversant exclusively with this particular branch, it would at the same time afford opportunities for those who intended adopting general practice, to acquire a better and more correct knowledge of disorders connected with the teeth than is by any means generally possessed. One of the principal objects of special lectures is that more attention may be devoted to such structures as are, in their organisation, complicated and obscure, or it may be exceptional and unique; to become familiar with the healthy and morbid conditions of such organs, requires time to be devoted to their special study—as is the case for example, with the eye and its diseases; and the peculiarities of structural and functional characters met with in the development,—the tissues,—and the

diseases of the dental system in man, appear in this case to render such attention equally necessary.

To point out any one particular course to be pursued with such objects, and with the view of carrying these suggestions into effect, is not the purpose of these remarks. Their purposes are the inculcation of the great necessity existing for some improvement in the position of this branch of surgery; the enforcement of some available and general principles by which a more satisfactory mode of instruction, along with better qualifications, might be placed within the reach of those who adopt its practice: and, in advancing them, it is only echoing the sentiments prevailing among the great mass of dental practitioners of the present day. That no arrangement has been made long before this time, by which the practice of dental surgery might entail the possession of at least some surgical qualification, exhibits the neglect with which the subject has been treated; but this is no palliation of matters, nor any reason why they should any longer be left as they are; however much may be the disposition to advocate liberal views in a question of this kind, not only justice to patients, but justice to practitioner, here demands immediate reform. But the irregularity and inconsistency involved in the present circumstances of dental surgery, are too clearly perceptible to require much comment; surely their improvement may be confidently looked for; and that the objects we have in view in making these remarks will, at no distant period, be favourably regarded and ultimately obtained, seems a conviction with which any one regarding the matter impartially, cannot fail to be impressed.

I am, SIR,

Your obedient Servant,

J. SMITH.

EDINBURGH, 12, DUNDAS STREET,

February 1858.

