

Observations in reference to the licence of the Royal College of Physicians of London as a complete qualification to practise medicine, surgery, and midwifery : addressed to the Fellows of the College / by Richard Quain.

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OBSERVATIONS
IN REFERENCE TO
THE LICENCE
OF THE
ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS
OF
LONDON

AS A COMPLETE QUALIFICATION TO PRACTISE
MEDICINE, SURGERY, AND MIDWIFERY

ADDRESSED TO THE FELLOWS OF THE COLLEGE

BY

RICHARD QUAIN, M.D.

FELLOW OF THE COLLEGE

LATE SENIOR CENSOR AND LATE MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL

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THE OBJECT of the following Observations is, First, to show that the course of education and the examinations which a candidate for the Licence of the College of Physicians is required to undergo, are sufficient tests of his fitness to receive the Licence to practise medicine, surgery, and midwifery as conferred by the College. Secondly, to point out that the Licence is itself a full and legal qualification to practise medicine, surgery, and midwifery, and a sufficient guarantee for the public. Thirdly, to prove that it would be as unwise as it is unnecessary to make any change in the procedure by which the Licence is at present conferred; in fact, that the change under which the College proposes to cease to examine in surgery would be injurious to the interests alike of the public, of the profession, and of the College itself.

1. *The course of education and the examinations* required for the Licence are essentially the same as those contained in the full and elaborate scheme agreed upon by the representatives of all the medical authorities in England for a single Examining Board: they are essentially in harmony with it. Nothing can be more complete; whilst the steady increase in the number of candidates for the Licence since these regulations have come into operation, affords sufficient evidence that they have met with the approval of the profession. In the year 1880, the number of candidates who obtained the Licence was 79; in the present year they will exceed 200—being thus more than one-fourth of the total number of medical practitioners registered in England during the same period. It may be added that the entire number of persons who have obtained the Licence of our College since this qualification was established is 1992, of whom more than 1700 are at this moment on the College List. It seems to me unnecessary to adduce further proof of the estimate formed by the profession—more especially by the teaching portion of the profession, who

advise the students—of the merit of the course of education and examination required for our Licence.

2. The second point which I desire to establish is, that our *Licence is a full and legal qualification to practise medicine, surgery, and midwifery*. In proof of this statement no stronger evidence need be given than that which will be found in the words which are issued along with every Licence, and which are strictly in accordance with the words and spirit of the Act by which the College was confirmed in its privileges, viz., 32 Henry VIII. cap. 40, cl. 3 : *—

I certify that C. D., to whom this Licence has been granted by the College, and whose signature is subjoined, has been duly admitted to practise Physic as a Licentiate of the College, and that such Licence is a legal authority to him to practise Medicine, Surgery, and Midwifery.

Signed by the Registrar.

Further: this double qualification is accepted as a sufficient and complete qualification by the official authorities of the State. This fact is established by the following extract from a letter addressed by the Secretary of the Poor Law Board to the Registrar of the College, dated July 16, 1869 :—

I am directed to state that the Board will in future recognise the Licence in question (of R. C. P.) as conferring the right to practise both Medicine and Surgery; thus rendering the holder of such Licence legally qualified for the office of Medical Officer under the regulations of the Board.

(Signed) A. PEEL,
Secretary.

This document represents an official recognition of our Licence, which affects between 6000 and 7000 individuals holding appointments under the Poor Law Board.†

3. Such being the character of our Licence as regards its completeness and its value to the Licentiate, *it is difficult to understand how the College has allowed itself to be persuaded that a change in the method of granting it is desirable*. With the diplomas of some Corporations a reform is a necessity, inasmuch as they have no legal power to give a full qualification,

* ‘Forasmuch as the science of physic doth comprehend, include, and contain the knowledge of surgery as a special member and part of the same,’ &c.

† It is not a pleasant reflection to consider what will be thought by the Government, by the profession, and by the public of the College, which obtained this recognition, and acted thereon for so many years, now declaring its own incompetence.

and they are consequently obliged to place on the Medical Register the names of persons who are but partially qualified. This difficulty does not apply to the Licentiates of our College with respect to the examinations which they have undergone or to the diploma which they possess, for, as I have shown, the College, in granting its Licence, fulfils the desire expressed by the Medical Council, by the Colleges themselves, and by the profession, to the effect that every practitioner should have been tested in every department of medical science, by a single Examining Board, prior to his name being put upon the Register. It is, however, now proposed that the College should surrender its almost unique privilege of a Board examining in all the subjects required for a Licence to practise, and that it should compel a candidate seeking its Licence to go to the College of Surgeons or elsewhere for an examination in surgery.*

It is very difficult to see on what rational grounds such a proposition for breaking up the unity and simplicity of our

* The arrangements for an Examining Board between the two Colleges come very nearly to this: The College of Surgeons will appoint all the Examiners in Surgery, and chiefly those in Anatomy; will examine in Surgery, will give its diploma, and receive the same fee for this as it does at present.

The College of Physicians will appoint Examiners on all the subjects of Examination, as it does now, save those in Surgery. The Examination will be conducted as at present, and the College will issue its Licence, and receive the same fee for it. The result will be very much in accordance with what takes place at this moment. A candidate holding a surgical diploma, or undertaking to procure one, is exempted by our College from the Examination in Surgery, as he will be in the new arrangement. Each College must, however, still maintain its own Examining Board; for example, the College of Physicians must have a board prepared to examine candidates who come up possessed of a surgical qualification, obtained from *any* source, if such qualification be registrable. The same remark applies *vice versa* to the College of Surgeons. We thus have the number of Boards already in operation still maintained, and a new one, such as it is, will be added to the much complained of number already existing. But then comes the important difference between the past and the present: In the arrangement it is agreed that "Each of them (the Colleges) will abstain, as far as allowed by law, from the exercise of its independent privilege of giving a qualification," &c. In other words, the College of Physicians, which has, as is shown in the text, full legal powers to give a complete qualification, places itself in the same position as the College of Surgeons with its half qualification, having no such power or authority. This may be a clever or shrewd agreement on the part of the College of Surgeons, and it may be magnanimous in our College to accept it, but no feeling of this character should be allowed to supersede those principles of honour and of fidelity, which should guide us in preserving the great interest committed to our charge.

examination can be entertained. The principal argument used in favour of this change appears to be that the Fellows of our College are incapable, from their want of knowledge of surgical matters, of estimating the requirements for an examination in surgery, or of exercising sufficient control over the examiners. I have too high an opinion of the experience and sound judgment of our Fellows to allow that an objection can have the slightest cogency. The College has selected, and is quite capable of selecting, the best examiners in surgery, or in any other subject relating to our art, that can be found. Our surgical examiners are practically the same gentlemen as those who conduct the examinations at the University of London and the College of Surgeons. And I am told that our examination in surgery, which is written, oral, clinical, and practical, is in all respects equal to our examinations in medicine and midwifery, if not even more complete than they are. Judged at least by results, the examinations are in all respects most satisfactory. Further, it surely cannot be seriously maintained that the College can exercise less control over its own examiners, conducting its own examinations, than it can have over the examiners (and examinations) of other bodies, in England, Scotland, or Ireland, whose evidence of having granted a qualification in surgery it is willing to accept.

I am not aware of any other objection that has been raised to the present system. On the other hand, there are grave objections to the proposed change. Under the head of 'A Scheme for constituting an Examining Board in England by the Royal College of Physicians of London and the Royal College of Surgeons of England' (February, 1883), we find the words, 'Each of them will abstain, so far as allowed by law, from the exercise of its independent privilege of giving a qualification necessary for admission to the *Medical Register*.'

The agreement really amounts to this, that the College of Physicians will surrender its right to examine in surgery, and will join the College of Surgeons in adding yet another *quasi*-Examining Board to the many already in existence, as shown in a note on a preceding page.

But there is a still more serious obstacle to the scheme. Let us assume that a candidate, ready to submit to the regulations of the College, applies to be admitted to the examination

for the Licence. He will be told that he is required to pass, in surgery, an examination conducted by the College of Surgeons, or by some other surgical authority. To this, of course, he cannot object, for the College of Physicians can frame the regulations under which it will give its Licence, and to pass an examination conducted by a College of Surgeons may be one of them. But the candidate may reply, 'If you decline to examine me in surgery, which you are required to do by the Act of Parliament under which this Licence is granted by your own Board, you surely do not require me to pay twenty guineas for passing the surgical examination of another Board, which the College of Physicians is itself capable of conducting? I protest against being *compelled* to become a member of a College of Surgeons, a title which I do not desire nor want, and I object to being compelled to pay thirty-six guineas in place of fifteen.' The candidate would be perfectly right. The College having undertaken to perform by law a certain duty, and enjoying by the same law a number of great privileges, can by law be required to fulfil its duty, if it fail to do so. There can be no doubt that a *mandamus* could be obtained by such a candidate, requiring the College to examine him for its Licence, and if he were found competent, to give him its complete Licence as at present. The words 'as far as allowed by law,' in the clause which I have quoted from the scheme of the two Colleges, afford evidence that the framers of the scheme were conscious of the existence of this difficulty. I have heard it said that the College might proceed with the scheme, and wait until legal proceedings have been commenced against it. For my part, I have too high an opinion of the honour, the integrity, and the dignity of the College of Physicians to believe that it will knowingly adopt and pursue an illegal course, waiting until the action of the law is called upon to check it.

Lastly, I desire to express my conviction that the interests neither of the profession, nor of the public, nor of the College will be advanced by our College altering the system which it established of granting an all-sufficient diploma by a single Examining Board. The close association of the whole profession with our College should be encouraged, inasmuch as the control which the College exercises over its Fellows, Members,

and Licentiates cannot fail to elevate the character of the profession generally, and thus greatly tend to promote the interests of the public. There are now more than 1700 gentlemen on the College List holding its Licence, each of whom is entitled (in accordance with the opinion of the present Lord Chancellor and Mr. Justice Denman, given when acting as advising counsel to the College) to the title of *Physician*. It occurs to me that this title, coming more generally into use, will become ere long familiar to the profession and the public. A discussion has recently arisen as to the means by which the title of *Doctor* might be obtained for persons holding diplomas from the College, but who do not possess University degrees. The interest in this question would assuredly be lessened if the title of *Physician*, in accordance with the opinion above alluded to, were generally adopted by the holders of our Licence. This title would be far more appropriate for them than that of *Surgeon*, a designation rather absurdly applied to practitioners almost exclusively engaged in treating medical cases!

In conclusion, I desire to repeat my conviction, first, that the course of education laid down by the College to be followed by candidates for its Licence, and the examinations conducted by examiners of the highest skill and attainments, are a sufficient guarantee as regards the fitness of our Licentiates to practise physic in the widest sense as defined by law as well as by precedent, viz., medicine, surgery, and midwifery.*

Secondly, that to *compel* a candidate for the Licence of our College to pay an additional fee (say of twenty guineas) for an examination in one of the subjects on which our College is not only authorised, but required by law, to examine him, will be regarded as a great hardship, as being at the same time unjust and illegal.

Thirdly, that we are bound by duty and by every sense of honour to hand down unimpaired to our successors the great privileges which our predecessors have handed down to us.

* It is worth remembering that surgery is not a new subject in connection with the College of Physicians. The Lumleian Lectures were founded by Lord Lumley and Dr. Caldwell for teaching surgery. Harvey was Professor of Surgery to the College, and he did not hesitate to perform surgical operations when necessary.