

**To the members of the Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh
/ [James Hamilton].**

Contributors

Hamilton, James, 1767-1839.
MacLagan, David, 1785-1865.
University of Edinburgh. Faculty of Medicine.

Publication/Creation

[Edinburgh] : [Murray & Mitchell, Printers], [1824.]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/t9txcjpp>

License and attribution

This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

*To the MEMBERS of the SENATUS ACADEMICUS of the
UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH,*

GENTLEMEN,

I BEG leave to submit to you the following Hints on the alterations respecting Medical Degrees, which have been submitted by the Medical Faculty to the Senatus Academicus, and which they wish to be taken into consideration in the month of October.

First, On the course of Study suggested by the Medical Faculty it is not necessary to offer any extended observations. If every Medical Graduate of our College were, like the Doctors of Medicine of the two English Universities, to act exclusively as a Physician, the course of Study recommended by the Medical Faculty must be allowed to be defective in many respects. But it is a fact quite undeniable, that a very large proportion of those who graduate at the University of Edinburgh settle as Surgeons and Apothecaries, in proof of which it is sufficient to state, that while, during the last ten years, One Thousand and Ten Gentlemen have graduated here as Doctors of Medicine, the number of Medical Graduates at the two English Universities of Oxford and Cambridge has, during the same period, not exceeded Forty-one, viz. Twenty-four at Oxford, and Seventeen at Cambridge.

From this fact, and other circumstances which might be mentioned, the inference is, that a Medical Degree from our College is regarded chiefly

chiefly as a Testimonial of the Candidate having paid such attention to his Medical Studies, as to enable him to enter on the duties of his Profession in the capacity of a General Practitioner; and, taking this view of the matter, the plan of Study recommended by the Medical Faculty may be deemed sufficient. But the expediency of requiring, that Candidates who have served a regular apprenticeship with a Surgeon, or that those who are already Assistant or Full Surgeons of the Army or Navy, should be compelled to attend this or any other University for four years, may perhaps be questioned; and, accordingly, the Medical Faculty do not seem to have made up their minds on this point.

Secondly, It appears to me, that the chief alteration which should take place in regard to the Regulations for Medical Degrees, ought to relate to the mode of *examining* Candidates, rather than to the exact course of Study.

The Medical Faculty have proposed a most important alteration, viz. Examining the Candidates in their Vernacular Tongue, thus following the example of America and of France, &c.

On the utility of this change it is quite unnecessary to offer any arguments. That a Classical Education is useful, and that a certain knowledge of the Latin Language is essential to every Medical Practitioner, cannot be doubted. But, in the present state of Science, it will be generally admitted, that the time spent in acquiring the habit of answering questions put in *Latin words*, might be better employed.

Having made this advance, it remains for the Senatus Academicus to decide upon such other measures as may still further improve the Examinations for Medical Degrees. The objects to be aimed at are, *First*, That the Examinators may be able to appreciate the qualifications of the several Candidates with the least possible risk of fallacy.

Secondly,

Secondly, That the Candidates shall have the fairest opportunity of shewing their acquirements. And, *Thirdly*, That the Examination shall be so conducted as to promote a zeal for Medical Study.

After considering deliberately the means most conducive to the above purposes, I take the liberty to suggest, for our imitation, the mode of Examination for Literary Degrees now established at the University of Cambridge, and at Trinity College, Dublin; and I venture to submit to your consideration the following Outline of a similar Plan.

First, On a particular day (say the 24th of June) annually, the Professors constituting the Medical Faculty shall meet, and each Professor shall bring a certain number, as ten or twelve, of written Questions on the subject of his particular Department; and the Professors giving Clinical Lectures shall also give in the same number of written Questions on Practical Subjects illustrated by the previous year's Clinical Lectures.

Secondly, Those Papers (containing the above Questions) shall be considered *seriatim* by the Medical Faculty; and it shall be determined by a plurality of Votes, what Questions relate to subjects of such importance as to warrant the rejection of the Candidate who does not satisfactorily answer them.

Thirdly, Each Member of the Medical Faculty shall be bound to promise solemnly, upon his word of honour, inviolable secrecy in regard to the proceedings till after the Graduation is over.

Fourthly, A sufficient number of Copies of the Questions thus agreed upon shall be printed, under the superintendence of one of the Professors, by a confidential artist, with such precautions as shall preclude the possibility of any person seeing the same.

Fifthly,

Fifthly, As soon as these printed papers are ready, the Candidates shall be assembled at an early hour of the morning, on a particular day, in the Common-Hall of the College, each Candidate being furnished with pens, paper, and ink; and one of the printed papers shall be put into the hands of each Candidate, and four hours shall be allowed to answer the above Questions,—the door being locked during that time, and one or more Medical Professors being present to secure due subordination, and to prevent one Candidate assisting another. Each Candidate, as he finishes the Answer to the Questions, is to sign it, and deliver it to the Professor, and may then be permitted to retire.

Sixthly, In the afternoon of the same day the Candidates should again assemble, and proceed in the same manner, and so on daily till all the series of Questions are answered.

Seventhly, When all these Answers of the Candidates have been given in, the Medical Faculty shall again meet, and examine the papers; and decide, agreeably to the principles previously established, and recorded in their private books, on the qualifications of the several Candidates.

That the above Sketch of a Plan now offered, will be found to answer all the purposes of Examinations for the Medical Degrees of our College, may be illustrated by a very few words.

In the *first* place, The Examinators can have none of those difficulties in appreciating the qualifications of the Candidates which must arise from a *viva voce* Examination, where one error may so overpower the feelings of the Candidate, that he may become incapable of understanding the subsequent questions, or where the manner of putting a question might render it unintelligible to the Candidate.

The

The *second* advantage which this mode of Examination possesses, is giving the Candidates the fairest opportunity of shewing their acquirements.—The Questions are printed, and cannot therefore be misunderstood, and full time is allowed for a deliberate answer. The embarrassment of speaking before Judges is avoided, and every Candidate has the opportunity of possessing self-confidence.

Thirdly, That this Plan will promote Medical Study cannot for a moment be doubted. It holds out an inducement, and indeed a necessity, for attending minutely to every Branch of Study declared to be necessary for a Medical Degree,—of course, it enforces regular attendance on the several Classes throughout the whole Course; whereas it is well known, that, according to the late System, the Candidates for the last many weeks of the Winter Course have been in the habit of neglecting their Classes.—It may be added, that in proportion as the System becomes familiar, the acquirements for Degrees will become higher and higher from the emulation of the Candidates. Experience has in a very remarkable manner verified this expectation, in the cases of the University of Cambridge, and of Trinity College, Dublin. Ever since this mode of examination was instituted at Cambridge, the questions have annually become more difficult, and the acquirements in Classical and Mathematical Knowledge of the Students of the present day are beyond all description superior to what they were even ten years ago. On this subject the Members of the Senatus are confidently referred for further information to the First Volume of Lardner's System of Algebraic Geometry, Introduction, Page XXXVI. *et sequentes*.

The *last* advantage which may be mentioned as resulting from the above Plan, is the utter impossibility of any rejected Candidate alleging partiality in the Examinators, which is a matter of no small importance.

Against

Against the adoption of this plan, the chief objection which may be urged is the *publicity* of the Examination. Hitherto it has been the custom for the Examinators to take every means of concealing the names of the unsuccessful Candidates; and the motives which led to this rule are so amiable and so honourable, that it may be difficult to persuade those who have hitherto followed it that it should now be departed from.

If the experiment were to be tried for the first time, it might be plausibly alleged, that the promise of secrecy in the event of failure might be an inducement to the idle and the ignorant to hazard a trial where there could be no loss. But it is believed that this has not hitherto been the case, and that the unsuccessful Candidates have seldom taken the trouble to conceal from their Companions and their fellow Students their disappointment. Certain it is, that, generally speaking, every rejection has been known amongst the Students.

It must, however, be perfectly obvious, that while a secret Examination holds out a temptation to the idle, a public Examination must tend to promote Study and Emulation among the industrious Students. If this be the case, it is the bounden duty of the Examinators to sacrifice their private feelings to the public good. In the present instance, the experience of the University of Cambridge, and of Trinity College, Dublin, has in the most unequivocal manner confirmed the utility of this Plan as already specified; and therefore, although an innovation in our College, it is not to be considered as a Hypothetical or Utopian proposal. There is every reason to expect, that, by adopting a plan of this kind, an ardent zeal for the cultivation of every branch of Medical Study will be promoted amongst the young men, and that the time may not be far distant, when a Classification of Medical Honours, by the conferring of Annual Prizes, may be introduced.

Should

Should it be objected to the above plan, that no specific provision is made for ascertaining that the Candidate has such Classical acquirements as shall enable him to prescribe intelligibly and scientifically, the answer is obvious, for there can be no difficulty in arranging, that one of the Questions put by the Professor of the Practice of Physic may be the translation of one or more quoted passages from Celsus or any of the old Latin authors, and one or more of the Questions of the Professor of Materia Medica ought of necessity to relate to the art of prescribing, and to the doses of Medicine.

On the subject of Medical Theses little need be said. It is to be remarked, that the Medical Faculty appear to have already seen the inutility of such Theses, as in Page 2d of their Printed Paper they leave the matter optional, and they certainly have the best grounds for doing so. Such Exercises must have been troublesome and expensive to the Candidates, while they can scarcely be said to have been conducive to the promotion of Medical Science. Nobody can doubt the difficulty which a young man must experience in writing a Treatise on a Medical subject, which is to be critically examined by his Preceptors and by his Companions; and it may be easily understood, how much time, which might have been profitably employed in the acquisition of knowledge, may be thrown away upon such an Exercise.

Perhaps it may appear fastidious to state the *Expense* of printing the Thesis; at the same time, as one of the Graduates of the present year told me that his Thesis, which did not exceed Thirty-two Pages, cost him Eight Guineas for Printing, the Members of the Senatus Academicus should know this.

In concluding, I have only one further observation to make. While the above Plan would secure to the Candidates the utmost impartiality, —to the University the high credit of promoting Emulation among the Students,—

Students,—and to the public at large the certainty that no incompetent person should be honoured with the Degree of Doctor of Medicine from our College, it would, at the same time, enable the Examinators to do their duty without those personal sacrifices, in respect to time and trouble, which they have hitherto felt it necessary to make.

I have the honor to be,

GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient humble Servant,

JAS HAMILTON, Junr.

Edinburgh, 23. St Andrew's Square,

September 27. 1824.

Murray & Mitchell, Printers.

Edw. MacLaggan
George MacLaggan