

A Short History of Dentistry in Edinburgh



In the middle of the 19th Century the practice of dentistry in Scotland was completely unregulated. For the man in the street it was difficult to know who was a skilled operator and who was not.

There were several grades of practitioners, surgeons who practised dentistry as a speciality, rightly named surgeon-dentists and others who greatly outnumbered them, including chemists and druggists, the mechanically trained and a high percentage of blatant charlatans.

Many dentists were mechanically trained but had very little surgical knowledge. They were often proficient craftsmen, experienced in trades indirectly related to dentistry, such as goldsmiths, silversmiths, and watch-repairers. They could readily construct appliances and instruments required in the surgery or laboratory.

There was no organised training of dentists in Scotland. Many skilled operators took on apprentices and revealed their secrets and gave instruction on extracting teeth, filling cavities with gold foil and other chairside practices, only on payment of high fees.

In 1856 Dr John Smith, a surgeon-dentist and later President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, was the first person in Scotland to conduct a course on dentistry with clinical instruction for medical students at the Royal College.

Concerned about the poor dental health of the population of Edinburgh Dr John Smith, with his friends Francis B. Imlach, Peter Orphoot, and Robert Nasmyth, founded the Edinburgh Dental Dispensary at 1, Drummond Street in 1860 to provide for those in need of dental care and to give clinical instruction in dentistry.

Agitation for major reform finally led to the Dentists Act of 1878. Under this Act only those who had undergone recognised training could call themselves 'dentist' or 'dental surgeon' and be admitted to the Register.

A deficiency of the Dentists Act of 1878 was that there was no requirement to register, thus it did not control the practice of dentistry. It was still possible to practice dentistry as long as the titles of 'dentist' or 'dental surgeon' were not used.

In 1880 the name was changed from Dental Dispensary to Edinburgh Dental Hospital and School and, after occupying various premises, moved to 31, Chambers Street in 1894.

Both in teaching and in examining there was a close link with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh which in 1879 had introduced the diploma of Licentiate in Dental Surgery (LDS). This was recognised for admission to the Dentists Register.

In 1895 Lilian Lindsay, who trained in the Edinburgh Dental School, became the first woman in Britain to qualify in dentistry.

It was the 1921 Dentists Act which finally raised the standards by requiring that all those who practised dentistry must be on the Dental Register. Only dentists who had been trained in a dental school could be admitted to the register and only registered dentists were permitted to practice dentistry.

In 1948 the Edinburgh Dental School became part of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Edinburgh and graduating students were awarded the university degree of Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS).

The Edinburgh Dental Hospital and School was rebuilt and modernised between 1952 and 1956 and the official reopening was carried out by the Secretary of State for Scotland.

In 1989, as part of an overall review of dentist numbers in the UK, a decision was made that undergraduate training in the Edinburgh Dental School should cease.

The last undergraduate students qualified in 1994, exactly one hundred years after the Edinburgh Dental Hospital and School moved to its Chambers Street site, and 134 years since Dr John Smith and his colleagues opened the Edinburgh Dental Dispensary.

In 1997 the Edinburgh Dental Institute for post-graduate education opened in new purpose built premises in Lauriston Place. This symbolises the commitment of the profession to furthering dental education and to the provision of dental care for the people of Edinburgh.

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