Remarks on the Occasion of the Bicentennial of the School of Medicine of the University of Pennsylvania

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Of the fifty or sixty meetings held by national and international medical organizations in Philadelphia during the Bicentennial year of the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania, none is more appreciated than this meeting of the American Surgical Association. Dr. I. S. Ravdin, who has personally participated in just about a half century of the life of this School, foresaw the usefulness of an analytical look backward as we plan for the third century of progress in medical teaching and research. For those of you who are interested in this period of medical history, I would refer you to the very readable account written by Dr. George Corner, Executive Officer of the American Philosophical Society and published in January, and the biography of Dr. John Morgan, written by Dr. Whitfield Bell, Assistant Librarian of the American Philosophical Society and published last week.

In 1760, eight decades after the founding of Philadelphia, apprenticeship was the order of the day for medical education. Benjamin Rush became apprenticed to Dr. John Redman of Philadelphia in 1761 at about the age of 15 and served 5 years with only 11 days and 3 nights off. However, the most promising of the young men were going abroad after apprenticeship, especially to London and Edinburgh, for special courses with such men as William and John Hunter, and for University degrees.

John Morgan, who was another of Redman’s apprentices, got out of the office more than Rush did—enough to take courses at the College of Philadelphia, obtaining the B.A. degree in 1757, and to serve for more than a year as apothecary to the Pennsylvania Hospital, founded in 1751, and to catalogue its slender library of 50 books. After military service in the French and Indian War he went abroad with a letter to Dr. John Fothergill of London at whose home so many young American physicians found a warm welcome. After participating in study at William Hunter’s School in London he went to Edinburgh, taking courses with William Cullen in medicine, Alexander Monro (secundus) in anatomy and others and received the M.D. degree in July of 1763. Thereupon Morgan visited the continent, spending several months in Paris and several more in London, having conversations and correspondence about starting a school in America.

By the time Morgan returned to Philadelphia in April of 1765 he was thirty years of age. He had been elected a Licentiate and afterward made a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in London, and while at sea was elected to the Royal Society—Dr. Franklin having advanced his initiation fee.

So well had he prepared the way that he met with the Trustees of the College of Philadelphia, as the University of Pennsylvania was then called, on May 3 and convinced them of the wisdom and feasibility of his plans. He was elected Professor of the Theory and Practice of Physic. He was joined by William Shippen as Professor of Anatomy and Midwifery the same year and by Benjamin Rush in Chemistry and Adam

Kuhn in Botany and Materia Medica a little later.

Morgan's ideas of the constitution and aims of a medical school were far reaching and indeed surprisingly in line with modern concepts. To quote Dr. Corner's summary, they included "affiliation with a University, qualified professors, thorough premedical preparation of students, a planned curriculum with well defined courses of instruction introducing the basic scientific studies before clinical work, close relations with a teaching hospital, a library, high standards for graduation." Morgan had seen also the need for laboratory-type demonstrations in anatomy, botany and chemistry. He even suggested that a medical school might become a center for research.

Despite, and indeed perhaps because of, his brilliant mind, he failed to carry his contemporaries along with him. There was serious quarrelling and impairment of reputations during the War for Independence, with Morgan being the center of controversy and the subject of calumny and vilification. Afterwards he gave up teaching and sank into obscurity, dying in 1789.

The long history of our medical school emphasizes again and again the shortcomings of physicians and scientists in the field of working together. That they did work together as well as they did was due to a common devotion to teaching young men to be as good doctors as the state of the applicable sciences would permit. Around this aim even the most quarrelsome professors would practically always rally. Much that Morgan envisaged so clearly took more than a century to accomplish, and today we look back with amazement that he was so far ahead of his time.

Taking the history of the School as a whole, it has suffered more from the excesses of its conservative elements than from the excesses of its radical elements. Perhaps this is the history of education in general.

One is impressed with the fact that institutions move forward in spurts. These eras of rapid progress are often compounded of favorable economic conditions, periods of relative peace, periods when a fair number of people have been able to produce more than they consume, and yet along with these background factors there always seems to be a person or a small group of people to provide enlightened leadership—persons whose human and intellectual endowments enable them to hold together enough key individuals in an institution to let it grow and provide the environment in which many men achieve fruition of their efforts and abilities. Such moments in the history of the University of Pennsylvania were the early period of Morgan and Rush, the period of the second William Pepper and the present period under Gaylord P. Harnwell as President and I. S. Ravdin as Vice President for Medical Affairs.

The momentum of an institution rests in large measure upon its traditions. The strength of tradition is most manifest in the ability of an institution to continue to attract students of high promise even during difficult times. This alone carries many an institution through lean periods. Tradition is therefore not something to be squandered thoughtlessly.

I will close with a quotation from Morgan's Discourse upon the Institution of Medical Schools in America, "Perhaps this medical institution, the first of its kind in America, though small in its beginning, may receive a constant increase of strength, and annually exert new vigour. It may collect a number of young persons, of more than ordinary abilities, and so improve their knowledge as to spread its reputation to distant parts. By sending these abroad duly qualified, or by exciting an emulation amongst men of parts and literature, it may give birth to other useful organizations of similar nature, or occasional rise, by its example, to numerous societies of different kinds, calculated to spread the light of knowledge through the whole American continent, wherever inhabited."