



Random Recollections of a Dental Student in the Early 1890s *

IN picturing professional life at that time one must understand that things were much simpler than today. Public transport in the Glasgow of the 1890s consisted of horse drawn tram cars and a few horse drawn omnibuses with an occasional 'hansom' or 'growler'- slang for a four-wheeled cab. Wealthy people had a carriage and pair and the doctor completed his rounds in a two-seater cab called a 'brougham'- a one horse closed carriage. There was no [mains] electricity, no wireless, no aeroplanes and no motor cars. The only illuminant was gas and all communication was by post or telegraph as telephones had not yet arrived. Money values were also very different with £200 a year constituting comparative respectability and a ton of coal costing 15s.

In Glasgow the dental profession was just beginning to take shape and this [present] plague of dental caries and wholesale extractions had not yet arrived. Dental decay was just an occasional happening and people mostly lost their teeth through old age. The Dental hospital was a four or five apartment main door house with additional rooms in the basement somewhat similar to houses adjoining the present Dental Hospital in Renfrew Street. It was situated at [4] Chatham Place (now Cathedral Street).

Patients were admitted to the basement and passed upstairs to the examination room and later to the extraction room or one of the two conservation rooms. There was no prosthetics laboratory as students were trained by apprenticeship in the workrooms of dentists in the City and other localities.

Hospital staffing was entirely undertaken by visiting dental surgeons on an honorary basis; there was no superintendent and no house surgeons. Clinical teaching was undertaken by visiting dental surgeons two of whom attended at each session on a rota without fee or reward. As all those taking part were leading practitioners in the City, this training was excellent and the atmosphere of 'dentist and patient' as it would be in private practice was always maintained. Naturally, there was a certain lack of continuity owing to these changes in supervision but that merely forced the student to use his own intelligence which was the best training of all. As far as examinations were concerned, great attention was paid to physical diagnosis in these days because visual examination by x-ray had not been invented. The hospital equipment and the students' outfit were very simple and limited to necessities. I think there were four chairs in the conservation room - two good and two not so good - and a very old-fashioned chair in the extraction room.

The spittoons were of the simplest and there were no sterilisers. Carbolic acid was still used routinely in operating theatres in all the general hospitals and we had not yet passed from the age of antiseptics into the era of asepsis. Light was provided by gas flames with reflectors and was quite good if not very adjustable. The student kit consisted of a dental engine driven by a foot pedal - Bonwill cord or S.S.White cable; a small assortment of burs, excavators, enamel chisels, sealers, mouth mirror, nerve barbs and root canal drills.

The Hospital was open each evening (from 5.30 to 7.30 I think) with demonstration clinics on some Saturday mornings. At these demonstration clinics leading Glasgow men gave students the latest technique on gold fillings, crowning and bridgework.

Lectures on special dental subjects of the curriculum were given during the summer sessions. Two courses were at eight o'clock in the morning so as not to interfere with the day's work of the students or the practice of the lecturers who were in receipt of fees which they handed back to the Hospital to help in its maintenance which was dependent on fees and public subscriptions. Tuition in dental mechanics was held after seven o'clock in the evening. I think that there were three courses of twelve lectures (I am not sure of the number). Dental Surgery, Dental Anatomy including Comparative Anatomy and Dental Mechanics (including Metallurgy). The classes were held either in the Hospital or in the house of the lecturer. In my year Mr Rees Price was lecturer in Dental Surgery, Mr Wallace in Dental Anatomy and Mr Biggs in Dental Mechanics and I still look back on the supreme erudition of Wallace and have vivid recollections of nights spent in Mr Biggs' workroom - he was quite a genius in his way. 1

I am not sure how the students arranged their time so as to fit in their classes, their prosthetic work and their clinical training because I took the medical curriculum, but I know that the majority of the students of my year spent all day in the workroom and putting in lectures at the Royal [Infirmery] or Andersonian extra-mural medical schools and attended the Dental Hospital in the evenings.

All in all it may seem a hard life by present day standards but it had the advantage that this necessary exclusion of outside interests made it easier to concentrate on their professional education. I suppose too one must come back to the beginning and reflect that life was simpler then and people possessed perhaps more of that elusive thing vulgarly called GUTS - this commodity was nationalised about twelve years ago and seems to be in short supply under the Welfare State. I hope and trust much of it will remain in the ranks of the dental profession.

1 It is not clear which of the Wallace brothers is referred to here. Although Sim Wallace obtained an MD in 1893 from the University of Glasgow it was not until 1895 that he obtained his diploma in Dental Surgery from the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons Glasgow. William Wallace graduated in medicine from the University of Glasgow in 1887 and obtained his LDS in 1889. At that time he was also in practice in Glasgow whereas Sim Wallace was not. To quote T Brown Henderson in his History of the Glasgow Dental Hospital and School 1879-1979 p18, "... but in six months owing to the demands of his growing practice he was forced to resign. " So it is more likely that it was William who is referred to here. Brown Henderson wrote that it was Sim Wallace who was appointed to the post of House Surgeon, this may also be incorrect. (ed).

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1 This letter was dated 3 September 1959.