



Recollections of a Dental Student in 1899 *

Affairs were of an unimaginable primitiveness in 1899. The Dental Hospital was on the top floor of the building in St Vincent Place just before one reached Queen Street. Office premises were on the lower floor one of which was occupied by Donaldson, Alexander and Kirkland, solicitors; Kirkland being the secretary to the Hospital. The Dean was Mr J Rankine Brownlie who was in practice in West George Street, near Blythswood Square and whose son Douglas was a contemporary of Dr J Forbes Webster. An ex-soldier was janitor, non-resident and his wife acted as clerk and registered patients as they entered. There were lectures on Dental Anatomy by Dr William Wallace; on Dental Mechanics by Dr McKay and on Dental Surgery. A new student would wander around "looking-on" as more senior students treated patients until one fine day he would be allocated his first unsuspecting patient. There was no practical work, no initiation work on phantom heads and no practical histology. Dental Mechanics was learned by an apprenticeship of five years or a pupillage of three years at a fee of £100. Dr J Forbes Webster was a pupil with Dr William Wallace, Newton Place. During this period he learned only vulcanite work and even 'pivot' work was in vulcanite. Forbes Webster afterwards came to Mr J G Angus's workshop where I was in full charge (without pay) and learned gold work etc. Together we sang cacaphonic duets until one day Mr Angus came down to the workshop in a rage. "For God's sake stop this row! My patients can hear you." In those days believe it or not, Dr Forbes Webster had a sense of humour. The visiting staff were rather casual attenders and the House Surgeon carried the load of general supervision and coaching. The hours of the Hospital were from 5pm to 7pm. The janitor and his wife left at 7pm and the students and patients thereafter closed the door as they left. The hour at which the last student and patient departed was nobody's business - and strange tales were reported!!! We students finished the job in hand and left for home sometimes as late as 8pm. Massive gold pluggings took time (inlays being unknown in these days) and naturally had to be completed at a single sitting. Equipment and apparatus was most primitive. Students placed their instruments on the floor in a bag in the manner of a plumber's kit. Chairs were raised or lowered by a ratchet mechanism and some could not be raised at all. The chair in the extraction room was made entirely of wood and would have been regarded as barbarous by a barber. No local anaesthetic (e.g. 5% cocaine) was considered safe to use and so extractions were carried out with "cold steel" forceps.

Unoccupied students sat upon a four foot high shelf overlooking the extraction chair and I well remember a student, Wilson (whose father was a dentist) falling from that shelf in a dead faint on seeing his first extraction. I did my first extraction after looking-on for a month when the House Surgeon pointed to me saying, "you do this one." It was a screaming success, a lower first permanent molar. The House Surgeon thereupon said "You've done this before." My humiliation came in due course. Life also had its brighter side. The general anaesthetic room was next door and when a suitable case arrived there was great excitement. The anaesthetist had to be summoned by telephone but the Hospital did not possess such a modern gadget. There was fierce competition for the task of being sent downstairs and round the corner to Queen Street to the nearest phone. The lucky student invariably returned licking his lips and with a broad smile. It was a mere coincidence that a pub was next door and in these days (pre Lloyd George) pubs were open all day. I well remember Thursdays, the day on which the 'Officer' as the member of staff was called was one Gardner by name. If the patient were female and of younger age, he invariably kept a close watch upon her heart beat during the anaesthesia by close precordial palpation. Curiously enough, male hearts did not concern him and were left to the attention of the anaesthetist. The 'operating table' so-called, was a wooden table of couch height on which lay a mattress covered by 'American cloth.'

The Act of Parliament of 1878 which created professional status was loosely constructed. Dental practitioners 'registered' by virtue of passing a licensing diploma examination and were permitted to call themselves 'Dentist 'or' Dental Surgeon.' But this select body was outnumbered by a ratio of about ten to one by unqualified practitioners calling themselves all sorts of evasive names such as 'Dental practitioner' etc. and flagrantly advertising on hoardings and newspapers. I well remember a handsome board measuring at least six feet by nine feet at the south-east junction of Hope Street and Sauchiehall Street which proclaimed "ARTIFICIAL TEETH by MacDonald etc." The spelling which amused school children remained uncorrected for years. Anyone could go through the motions of becoming a dentist provided that he or she did not use the name. [Dentist or Dental Surgeon]. As a consequence of this laxity the unqualified screamed their wares on a commercial basis. Chemists were often extractors and GPs too. Not being licentiate permitted one to be licentious.'

* Based on material taken from a letter sent by Dr W Ferguson MacKenzie to T Brown Henderson as a contribution to his History of the Glasgow Dental Hospital and School 1879-1979.