

# Editorial

## DIPLOMAS AND DEGREES

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In a letter published on page 72 seven graduates of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons in Ireland draw attention to the difficulty facing them by virtue of being unable to obtain a post-graduate degree. The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, the Colleges confer a primary diploma and not a degree and although graduates may sit the Membership of the College of Physicians and the Fellowship of the College of Surgeons, the Colleges do not confer post-graduate degrees. Secondly, universities which might in certain circumstances accept a graduate for a post-graduate degree do not consider a diploma equivalent to a degree. This fact serves to limit a graduate's career prospects in the competitive fields of academic medicine and is — especially abroad — an adverse reflection on his qualification and the educational standards under which he trained.

The graduate's frustration is all the more understandable when it is realised that Universities in Europe and the United States accept College students on transfer for completion of

training and that many graduates hold academic and professorial positions in both Irish and foreign universities. Furthermore, the College (at comparatively little cost to the taxpayer) produces the second highest number of graduates practising in Ireland and in addition trains a large number of doctors for overseas countries. The College contributes substantially to medical research in this country, expenditure by the College on research in 1969 being £67,700 as compared with £117,000 by University College, Dublin, and £22,700 by University College Cork.<sup>1</sup>

Proponents of the view that a university environment is desirable — and some would argue essential — for the education of the complete Asclepiad, should examine closely and honestly the extent to which the modern medical student avails of general university facilities. There are, of course, examples of many institutions similar to the College in Europe and America which have the right to confer degrees. In London there are no less than twelve medical schools with considerable

independence from university control. The Colleges of Advanced Technology and the Royal College of Art in Britain have in recent years been granted authority to award degrees in accordance with the recommendations of the Robbins Committee on Higher Education<sup>2</sup> that "universities are no longer the sole producers of fulltime higher education at degree level . . . [and] that in any properly co-ordinated system of higher education the academic grading of individuals should depend on their academic accomplishments rather than on the status of the institution in which they have studied".

Recourse to a dictionary in an effort to solve the semantic aspects of the problem is not helpful; a degree is defined as a mark of distinction conferred by universities, a licence is a document by which authority is conferred, a licentiate is a holder of an academic diploma and a diploma is a writing conferring authority — such as a university degree.

Examination of the College rights under its Charter (the first one was granted by King George III in 1784) shows that the College does have the right to confer its own degrees. A supplemental charter of 1844 states that it is "lawful for the Council (or a majority thereof) to perform the duties and functions of the College and . . . to make and publish and alter, change, annul from time to time, such

bye-laws, rules, ordinances and constitutions as to them shall seem requisite for the regulation, good government and advantage of the said body and the *licentiates* of the said College . . ." This stipulation — to quote the College's legal advisor — puts "not merely a facility but an obligation on the College" to grant a degree rather than a diploma. Acting accordingly the Council of the College in 1971 submitted amended bye-laws to the Minister of Education for ratification — this being a mandatory requirement. These Bye-laws stated that a Licentiate "shall be entitled . . . to be awarded and conferred with a primary degree . . . the Degree of Bachelor in Medicine (M.B.) or the Degree of Bachelor in Dental Surgery (B.D.S.)". The College has expressed to the Government on a number of occasions the urgency with which it views this matter but the amended Bye-laws still await approval. Meanwhile graduates of the College will have to labour under the present disadvantages in the pursuance of their individual careers but perhaps more distressing is the fact that Irish medical education abroad is suffering simply by virtue of the poor international standing of diplomas.

1. Report on the National Science Council. Research and Development in Ireland, 1969.
2. Higher Education Report. 1963. London. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

## Correspondence

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### LICENTIATE AND SPECIALISATION

Sir, — While mindful of the great efforts made by the College to secure for us a means of attaining an M.D. by thesis, many graduates are disappointed by the lack of progress made in this direction. We would remind your readers, that the Licentiate puts a ceiling to the ambitions of those who feel an M.D. is essential for their advancement in Specialist Training.

Opportunities for doing a Ph.D. as an alternative to an M.D. are limited and may involve up to three years away from clinical practice and experience. Besides, many holders of academic appointments hold an M.D., in addition to a Ph.D. and their appropriate Fellowship or Membership.

Until such time as they can do an M.D. with the same facility as other graduates, Surgeon's graduates will be at a permanent disadvantage in the more competitive fields of specialisation.

Yours faithfully,

S. Rogers, MRCP., MRCPI.  
Senior Registrar, Dermatology,  
Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast.

A. Taaffe, MRCP., MRCPI.  
Registrar in General Medicine,  
Altnagelvin Hospital, Londonderry.

V. Braganza, LRCPSI.  
Senior House Officer, General Medicine,  
Belfast City Hospital, Belfast.

M. G. Salter, LRCPSI.  
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The City Hospital, Nottingham.

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# Correspondence

## Degree v. License

Sir,

I read with interest the multi-signed letter on the prospect of degrees being awarded in RCSI in the October, 1974 issue (Vol. 4, pp. 71, 72).

At the instigation of the Registrar of the College of Surgeons I have been in communication with the Department of Education about this matter and feel that the contents of my letter and that of the reply would be of interest to your readers.

Yours etc.,

Robert F. Harrison,  
MRCP(L), FRCS(Ed), MRCOG,  
Institute of Obstetrics and Gynaecology,  
University of London,  
Queen Charlotte's Maternity Hospital London.

Dr. Harrison's letter to the Department of Education.

Sir,

I qualified L.R.C.P. & S.I. in July 1967 after six years at The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

I chose Obstetrics and Gynaecology for my future career and proceeded F.R.C.S. (Edinburgh) in May 1971, M.R.C.O.G. February 1972 and M.R.C.P. (Ireland) March 1972 whilst still in hospital practice in Dublin.

By June 1972 however, in common with the majority of Irish graduates, due to the lack of a proper career training structure I had to try and obtain a suitable post elsewhere.

Academic medicine is now tending to establish a proper career structure with full time heads of departments rising from lecturer and Senior Lecturer ranks rather than by competition from the established full or part-time consultants.

In such a situation, to enable one to compete for higher posts, a higher university degree such as M.S. or in my own particular case, M.D. is almost essential and although a PhD is open to the College of Surgeons graduate this may not always be considered appropriate in clinical academic medicine.

Ireland is in the fortunate position of being able to export trained doctors to all parts of the globe who act as excellent ambassadors for the country. A great number of these will be R.C.S.I. graduates and it seems invidious that due to a historical anachronism the surgeon graduate through no fault of his own, due to his inability to proceed to M.D. or M.S. degrees may find himself at a considerable disadvantage in competing for positions which in some spheres of medicine in some countries may be the only posts open to him.

I will be grateful for your comments as to when this situation can hope to be rectified.

Yours etc.,

Robert F. Harrison,  
FRCS(Ed), MRCOG., MRCP(Irel), DCH.

Reply to Dr. Harrison from the Department of Education.

Dear Mr. Harrison,

I write in reply to your letter of 17 December, 1974, the contents of which I have read with great interest.

As you are probably aware, the Registrar and Council of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland have been anxious for some time to award degrees rather than Licentiates in Medicine and Dentistry, and have from time to time in recent years made representations to the Minister for Education in connection with the necessary Bye-Laws. I may add that in these representations the experience of alumni of the College in various parts of the world has been referred to and quoted in support of the Council's proposals.

You will, of course, appreciate that to change from awarding Licentiates to awarding Degrees is by no means a straightforward process in that, for example, other degree-awarding bodies, institutions and interests are involved.

In the present case there has, of course, been the additional difficulty that the Council's initiatives in the matter have coincided with a series of proposals and counter-proposals and long and detailed discussion over the whole sphere of higher education. You will recall that the Government made certain proposals in 1967, that what has since then become known as the NUI/TCD Agreement, dealing mainly with the university situation in Dublin, was drawn up and that this, in turn, was followed by the recommendations of the Higher Education Authority, which had a very special importance in regard to the future of the College of Surgeons. Finally, the Minister for Education announced the Government's decisions on higher education on 16 December last. These decisions, too, have as you no doubt know by now, significant implications for the College.

It is to be hoped that, now that the future pattern of higher education in general, including medical education, and the roles of different institutions have become clearer, the question of the type and range of qualifications to be awarded by different institutions may be clarified as soon as possible.

Yours

S. Ó Conchobhair,  
Rúnaí, Department of Education,  
Dublin 1.

Sir,

I am a graduate of the R.C.S.I. (1955). In the October 1974 issue of the College Journal (Vol. 4, p. 70) it was mentioned that there was a proposal that graduates would probably in future be conferred with the degree of M.D. I shall be grateful to know if this is still in the "pipe line" and if so the progress made?

Yours etc.,  
M. G. Dignan,  
96 Overton Drive,  
Wansted, London E11.

Sir,

I graduated from RCSE in June 1970. I got through the Primary FRCS in February, 1972 and obtained second place in that examination. I then started my training in Ophthalmology at St. Thomas' Hospital in London. I got through the Diploma in Ophthalmology in July, 1975 and the FRCS (Ophthalmology) in June, 1974. I am now a second year Registrar in the St. Thomas' Hospital Training Scheme.

I strongly feel like doing an MD. or MCh. in Ophthalmology, but holding a Licentiate of the College is a big barrier. The College of Surgeons has some agreement with T.C.D. regarding doing a PhD, but as this means a couple of years away from clinical practice it is therefore unattractive.

I only hope that my complaint will not be neglected and I have heard it said -- long before I graduated -- that the College will start conferring degrees, but so far absolutely no progress has been made and I am indeed very very disappointed.

Yours etc.,

E. M. Gaya, MRCP, FRCS(Oph.), DO.  
St. Thomas' Hospital,  
London S.E.1.

Sir,

We wish to point out the publication of our earlier letter notwithstanding (Rogers, Taaffe and others, Journal of the Irish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons 1974, 4, 72.) that graduates of the College still find the Licence a qualification which denies them equal opportunity with the graduates of every other medical school in these Islands. One of us, (A. T.) attempted to sit for M.B. as an external student at the University of London but was informed that this was no longer possible. With the closure of this avenue of approach to securing an MD. through research, the Surgeons graduate is severely handicapped if he wishes to secure an appointment in a British teaching hospital.

Despite reassurances to the contrary candidates for teaching hospital appointments are expected to show an interest in participating in or leading a research project. The selection board will naturally regard the possession of an M.D. as, at the very least, a measure of the candidate's experience in his chosen field of scholarship. Furthermore, with the present economic exigencies research facilities are now being awarded with circumspection so that the Surgeons graduate who is given such facilities will be increasingly regarded as blocking the chances of another gaining his M.D. Thus, even without the M.D. the Surgeons graduate is unlikely to secure experience in research. The difficulties surrounding PhD degrees were mentioned by us previously.

In summing up, we would like to reiterate that the Licence puts a ceiling to the ambitions of those graduates working in General Medicine or its allied specialities.

Yours etc.,

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