

History of Medicine:

The Early Years of the University of the Witwatersrand Medical School and its Students*

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SUMMARY

During the early years of the Johannesburg Hospital and the University of the Witwatersrand and its parent institutions, the Medical School was established on Hospital Hill. Basic science teaching was started in 1917 in the old School of Mines and Technology, and the first 4 graduates qualified in November 1924. The staff were mainly English and Scottish professors, who imparted much of the tradition of their own institutions to the young School. From the beginning the students engaged in the organization of societies and the running of campus affairs. They succeeded in establishing the first Student Faculty Council in 1930. Many of the student leaders of the early years have made notable contributions to the South African community.

S. Afr. Med. J., 47, 113 (1973).

The Government of the Transvaal proclaimed the Goldfields of Johannesburg in 1886. As a result of the glittering riches that were so readily won from the Witwatersrand reefs, the mining settlement of tents and huts grew into a town of ever-increasing size and importance. The rapid establishment of an initially primitive mining industry, resulted in a heavy toll of sick and injured. Hospital facilities were provided by the Johannesburg Hospital Board, constituted in 1888, with the assistance of the Transvaal Government. The Johannesburg Hospital developed from a mud and wooden structure attached to the gaol into the Permanent Hospital of 1890, which remained until replaced by the present main block in 1939.

The rudiments of higher education began on the Witwatersrand in 1903, when the South African School of Mines and Technology (SASMT) of Kimberley was transferred to the new mining town north of the Vaal River, and renamed the Transvaal Technical Institute. In 1906 it became the Transvaal University College, but 4 years later was redesignated the SASMT by the Transvaal Parliament, and permitted to provide only for engineering and technological training. For nearly a decade this restriction created much disquiet on the Witwatersrand, and a crisis was precipitated in 1916 by the passage through the Union Parliament of the University Bill, which provided for the creation of full universities in Cape Town, Stellen-

bosch and Pretoria. A massive protest meeting in the Johannesburg Town Hall on 8 March 1916 formed the Witwatersrand University Committee. The Committee was mandated to formulate short-term and long-term plans for the expansion of the SASMT to an institution of University status, to serve the whole of the Witwatersrand area. The efforts of this 72-man committee were singularly successful, and after struggling against financial difficulties and an unsympathetic Union Government, the University of the Witwatersrand was founded by Act of Parliament on 1 March 1922.

The year 1916 was also a critical one for the teaching of Medicine in the Transvaal. On 7 April, just a month after the meeting in the Town Hall, the Council of the Witwatersrand Branch of the British Medical Association called a general meeting of registered practitioners of the Transvaal. Under the chairmanship of Sir Kendal Franks, the following resolutions were unanimously carried:

1. That in the opinion of this meeting of the Medical Profession of this Province, the time has now arrived when, in the interests of the community, a School of Medicine should be established in the Transvaal.
2. That the foregoing resolution be communicated to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education and all members of both Houses of Parliament.'

A Medical Advisory Committee was later formed consisting of Drs C. V. Anderson, E. P. Baumann, E. H. Cluver, W. Gordon Grant, R. P. Mackenzie, H. Temple Mursell, G. A. E. Murray, A. J. Orenstein, W. Watkins-Pitchford, Charles Porter, W. G. Rogers and E. P. Stibbe. The Memorandum of Recommendations of its Medical Subcommittee (1919) included a schedule of fees, namely £28 (R56) for first year, £32 (R64) for second year, £40 (R80) for each subsequent year; or a composite fee of £200 (R400) to cover all 6 years. Also of interest was the proposed curriculum and proposed professional examination system: first examination, in the preliminary scientific subjects at the end of the second term of the first year; second examination, in organic chemistry at the end of the second year, and in anatomy and physiology at the end of the first term of the third year; third examination, in pathology, bacteriology, pharmacology and *materia medica* at the end of the second term of the fourth year, and the fourth and final examination in the 'advanced medical subjects' at the completion of the sixth year.

As early as 1917, teaching for medical and dental training opened in Botany (Professor C. E. Moss),

Chemistry (Professor J. A. Wilkinson), Physics (Professor A. Ogg, soon replaced by Professor H. H. Paine) and Zoology (Professor H. B. Fantham). Botany and Zoology classes were held in the wood and iron building affectionately known as the 'Tin Temple' on the corner of De Villiers and Joubert Streets, where Atwell Park is situated today. Chemistry and Physics were taught in the laboratories of the SASMT, now the Witwatersrand Technical College, on the corner of De Villiers and Eloff Streets.

In 1919 there was an adequate number of students to constitute Anatomy and Physiology classes. Professor E. P. Stibbe was appointed to the Chair of Anatomy, and Professor E. H. Cluver to the Chair of Physiology. Thirteen students enrolled for the second year.

Anatomy was taught in a wood and iron converted stable in the north-east corner of the grounds of the South African Institute for Medical Research, adjacent to the site of the Medical School. Half the building was an office for Professor Stibbe, and half a dissection 'hall'. The 'hall' contained one table, one cadaver, a blackboard and a coatstand. The Professor demonstrated and the students dissected, using the three volumes of Cunningham's *Manual of Practical Anatomy* as a guide. Professor Stibbe was respected and popular for his quiet manner, his lucid lectures (at first given on the grass outside!) and his clear blackboard drawings. At this time Histology was taught in the School of Mines in Eloff Street, and the students used to walk or ride their bicycles between the two teaching venues.

On 28 January 1920, Viscount Buxton, Governor-General of the Union, laid the foundation stone of the new Medical School building in Hospital Street. The present south and west wings, each of two floors, had been built so that the stone was in fact some distance from the building. Professor Watt recalls that 'an excited Press photographer came and asked if it was really the foundation stone, and, if so, when it was likely to be incorporated into the building!' (it was in fact incorporated into the building with the completion of the east wing and entrance in 1924).

Anatomy moved into the ground floor of the west wing, and Physiology was taught (as it is now) on the second floor of the south wing. At first there were no doors and no window frames, and Professor Cluver used bricks as paperweights for his first lectures. Hospital Street was a dusty lane, and the building site was a 'waste of rough, rocky ground, high on the north side and sloping fairly precipitously to the building on the south. Here was the main entrance which consisted of several broad planks. Fortuitously these had been left by the builder, otherwise entry would have had to be by the south side with the coal and other domestic facilities. It was also possible with a great deal of effort to climb on to a platform and go through a swing door into the Anatomy Department.'

Johannesburg was well pleased with her Medical School which was at last a structural reality and engaged in preparing students for clinical studies. However, the welcome and acceptance were not unanimous. A large body of opinion still held that the time and facilities were not right for training medical students, and many left for

the universities of the United Kingdom after their first year of study in Johannesburg. Indeed, in February 1919, after the cessation of World War I hostilities, more than 100 aspirant medical and dental students sailed on the 'Briton' in the first available civilian berths to England. This number far exceeded those entering similar courses in Cape Town and Johannesburg. But the establishment of the Medical School on the Witwatersrand was nevertheless welcomed and *The Star* in an editorial, after the laying of the foundation stone, reflected local feelings:

'What is needed, particularly in South Africa, where there is little of tradition and less of reverence, is an institution, which will give not only the best scholastic training, but will inculcate in its students a spirit of comradeship, *esprit de corps*, of citizenship—all the qualities which constitute real culture.'

In 1921 the first student was permitted to walk the wards of the Johannesburg Hospital. He was Leopold Klein, who had obtained his Medical B.A. in Cape Town in 1920. He was required to study Pathology in Johannesburg, while being allowed to begin his clinical work. His motives for transferring to the Transvaal were purely practical—in Cape Town the Medical School was separated from the wards of Somerset Hospital by many miles, whereas in Johannesburg he had only to walk across the street! Thus Leopold Klein started his clinical clerkship as the sole student of the newly-arrived Professor of Medicine—O. K. Williamson. He recalls that this relationship stood him in good stead at examination time! He was later joined by 17 other students—L. D. Adler, Miss S. D. M. Blake, Miss E. Binion, I. Carpel, L. I. Cohen, C. Duthie, I. Effren, S. J. Fox, Miss E. Franks, I. Frack, N. Garber, F. P. Grobbelaar, B. Kuny, I. Liknaitsky, G. F. Slade, J. Tasker and G. C. Thomson.

These 18 invaded the wards 'to make contact with living patients'. The reception was variable, especially from the ward sisters, whose attitudes varied from 'strict discipline to maternal solicitude', and the patients who did not all regard the students as 'a boon or a blessing'. These problems were smoothed out with the guidance and wisdom of the Superintendent, Dr Ronald Mackenzie. Teaching was lively and memorable under the English and Scottish professors, who imparted much of the great traditions of their old schools to their new students. Professors G. Ritchie Thomson (Surgery), O. K. Williamson (Medicine), J. McGibbon (Midwifery) and W. Gordon Grant (Gynaecology), and others, made a lasting and vivid impression. All teaching was done in the Johannesburg Hospital, except for periods of residence at Weskoppies Institution, near Pretoria, and the Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital.

November 1924 was a proud month for the University, as the first 4 students qualified M.B. B.Ch. A dinner was held in the Trocadero Restaurant, and was attended by both the successful and unsuccessful final-year students, all the professors and the examiners. Speeches, both good and indifferent, were made, mostly 'with a humour of a peculiarly medical aspect'. The 4 students—Lockie Klein, Ben Kuny, Eric Slade and Clifford Thomson—presented an inscribed brass plate to the Faculty to commemorate the occasion:

'Presented
TO THE MEDICAL SCHOOL

as a token of esteem
by

L. Klein G. F. Slade
B. Kuny G. C. Thomson

First Graduates in Medicine
of the University of the Witwatersrand,
November 1924'

The graduation ceremony was held in the Town Hall in March of the following year, and the 4 were capped by Professor J. M. Watt.

The year 1925 was a turning-point for the Medical School. Seventeen students qualified, second-year enrolment had swelled to tax the teaching accommodation, Professor R. A. Dart was Dean, and doubts about the ability and worth of the School as a clinical training institution were subsiding. Now the majority of South Africans wishing to study medicine were seeking admission to South African universities, and to travel to Europe became the exception rather than the rule. Thus, by 1930, with 99 graduates from the Witwatersrand and 143 graduates from Cape Town, local medical schools had started to provide the major share of practitioners in South Africa.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

The extracurricular activities of the students of the young School are a fascinating chronicle, reflecting the origins of the service they paid in later life to the South African community. Their imagination and determination serve to remind us of the role of the university in moulding professional, civic and national leaders. The success of a medical school depends partly on the tradition established in the school. Tradition emanates from the teachers, but 'crystallizes in the activities and the endeavours of the student body'.

No sooner had the first students been enrolled in the classes of 1917, than they organized themselves into a vociferous and constructive body. A letter was addressed to the Students' Representative Council on 3 September 1917, requesting permission to form a Medical Society. This was rejected on the grounds that admission would not be open to all students. Not daunted, the SRC was then requested to call a General Meeting to approve the formation of a Biological Society, which was duly approved on 16 October 1917. The committee elected to draw up the Constitution was dominated by medical students, and in April 1918, they submitted their proposals:

1. Membership is open to all students of the SASMT, recognized as such by the SRC.
2. Aims and objects of the Society are as follows: to promote interest in biological and cognate sub-

jects by means of illuminated lectures, excursions, etc.

3. Members of the Society will be required to pay a subscription of 6d (5c) monthly.
4. The Society comprises the following: an Honorary President; 3 Honorary Vice-Presidents; 1 Honorary Secretary; 1 Honorary Chairman; 1 Honorary Treasurer; and 4 committee members, and such members as pay the specified membership fee.'

After some debate Clause 3 and 'and such . . . fee' were deleted, and the Constitution, as amended, was adopted. At that time the only campus organizations allowed by the SRC were The Union, and Swimming, Tennis and Rugby Clubs. In spite of the fact that the Biological Society was not permitted any secular activities, its members created the nucleus for medical student action. It was no surprise when the 1919 SRC permitted a change of name to the Biological and Medical Society, and in 1920 it became the Medical and Biological Society.

The 1920 Society Committee consisted solely of medical students. The Honorary President was Professor J. A. Wilkinson, and the two Honorary Vice-Presidents were Professors Stibbe and Cluver. This was the forerunner of the modern Students' Medical Council. Throughout 1920 the Society tried unsuccessfully to obtain voting representation on the SRC. They did, however, receive a grant of £10 (R20), which was used to organize monthly lectures, dancing classes and the annual dance. The Society was successful in establishing a happy and fruitful staff-student liaison.

The leading figure among the students was Lawrie Adler. He was Chairman of the Medical and Biological Society in 1920, organizer of the first University Rag in 1921, active on the committees of the Rugby, Athletics and Boxing Clubs, and finally President of the SRC in 1924. The 1921 Rag was a memorable affair; it was arranged to mark the closing of the SASMT, and to celebrate the advent of the University. A coffin was 'buried' on the steps of the School in Eloff Street, then recovered and ceremoniously opened. From it sprang a student, one Pringle, who ran away from the pursuing crowd. No money was collected, but great goodwill and publicity were won in the true spirit of Rag.

Isidore Liknaitzky, a far-sighted and brilliant student, carried two important resolutions through the SRC in 1922. The first was a request to Professor Stibbe to withdraw his controversial resignation from the Chair of Anatomy. The students drew up and collected signatures for a 'massive petition' among the student body. When Stibbe eventually left, the students made a presentation of an illuminated address and a purse to him. The second resolution was related to the creation of a medical sub-committee on the SRC. It consisted of the medical student representatives who were specifically charged

- (i) to protect the interests and regulate the activities of the Medical students, and
- (ii) to act as an intermediary body between the medical students, the medical staff and the hospital authorities.'

Although the concept of an elected negotiating body was widely hailed, the Principal, Jan Hofmeyr, curbed their powers considerably by instructing in a letter to the SRC on 22 March 1923, that all negotiating should be done through the SRC and not directly between the subcommittee and the staff and hospital.

A fifth-year student, Comyn ('the Duke') Duthie, was elected SRC President in 1923, and during his term of office the Medical Library Fund was started for student-subscribers. The Johannesburg Hospital Library benefited for several years from this spontaneous effort. Duthie was succeeded by Adler as SRC President in 1924. During this year the medical student representation on the SRC was so strong, that a motion proposing 'that the application of the Medical Society for recognition be granted', was unanimously carried. It is an interesting commentary on student activities of those times, that up to 1924 the students of no other faculty had applied for permission to form a representative student body. Although the engineers ran a subcommittee, it had no official standing and received no regular financial assistance. The Medical School placed two rooms at the disposal of the Medical Society as common rooms, and S. Heyman was deputed to interview the Senate to determine what jurisdiction the Society could exercise over the rooms. With official recognition and territory to rule over, the Students' Medical Society flourished and its activities diversified. Its members played an active part in University Week, held regular meetings with invited lecturers, organized dances and appointed student librarians. Proceeds from their efforts were donated to the University Development Fund. Less successful were their appeals for garage accommodation for student motor cars, and for an improvement of the residence food at the Queen Victoria Hospital.

The greatest achievement of the 1928 Society, was the publication of the first edition of *The Leech*. It was the first journal produced by medical students in South Africa, and was instituted to 'stimulate research and clear methods of thought.' It appeared in November 1928, amid a storm of debate and prophecies of an early and ignominious death. The name was a result of open competition and was severely criticized after its adoption. The first issue was a small, brown-paper covered journal of 48 pages in single-column type. The proud Editorial Committee was headed by Mr A. Lee McGregor and Dr P. Menof, with I. Goldblatt as Student Editor. They proposed to sell future copies for 1/- (10c) quarterly, and to include no advertisements. It was open to both graduates and undergraduates and contained scientific papers and local news and letters.

In 1929 Cyril Adler organized the first fund-raising University Rag. It was known as the Hospital Rag and a grand procession and lively student antics collected £1 222 (R2 444) for the Radium Fund. This was Cyril Adler's introduction to student affairs. He made spectacular progress, and much of the student organization of today owes its origins to his inspired ideas.

One of Adler's most memorable meetings was that of the SRC on Thursday, 1 May 1930, in the Senate Room at Milner Park. With W. Gordon Murray in the Chair,

Adler moved to revise the constitution of the Students' Medical Society. He presented a draft constitution for a Students' Medical Council. A protracted and heated debate ensued. The Chairman took strong exception to the designation 'Council', whereas Adler contested that this name 'would carry more weight in medical circles'. Many felt that an SMC would create further differences between the Hospital Hill and Milner Park campuses. When a vote was taken, the new draft constitution providing for a Students' Medical Council was adopted by 19 votes to 4, but it was emphatically noted 'that the new Council was a subcommittee of the SRC and subjected to the jurisdiction of that body in every respect'.

A great celebration was held on the roof of the Medical School with Professor Dart eulogistically addressing the meeting. In the subsequent elections P. H. Marks (President), C. Adler (Vice-President), J. H. Gear (Treasurer), E. L. Fisher (Secretary) and 12 Council members, were placed in office to run the first Student Faculty Council in South Africa, and to continue to expand the work of the old Students' Medical Society.

Thus ended an epic 14-year struggle by the medical students to achieve a Faculty Council government. The value and success of the system were soon realized, and it was adopted by universities throughout South Africa.

The research for this account was promoted by the inadequacies and inaccuracies of the published records. No attempt at completeness has been made, but it has been written with several purposes in mind:

- (i) to record the memories of those who were students in the early years of the Medical School;
- (ii) to trace the student careers of some of those who have made noteworthy contributions to Medicine in South Africa;
- (iii) to record aspects of the development of the organization of student affairs and government; and
- (iv) to create interest, and to stimulate others, to collect and record the history of the Medical School of the University of the Witwatersrand.

I wish to thank the following people for assistance in many ways: Dr and Mrs C. Adler, Dr L. D. Adler, Dr M. Adler, Professor E. H. Cluver, Professor R. A. Dart, Professor F. Daubenton, the late Dr E. Franks, Professor J. H. Gear, Professor J. H. S. Gear, Dr I. Gluckman, Mr I. Isaacson, Dr L. Klein, Dr B. Kuny, Dr P. H. Marks, Dr P. Menof, Mr A. M. Shevitz, Dr E. A. Thomas, Dr A. J. Tinker, Professor P. V. Tobias and Mr I. Wessels.

The AMSSA-Old Mutual Research Fund made a grant towards part of the expenses.

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