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CRAMMING IN OUR MEDICAL SCHOOLS.¹

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A FEW years ago the ease with which a medical diploma could be obtained led to the passage of a law in many of the States that necessitated a three years' attendance upon a graded course of medical lectures. The effect of this has been the multiplication of professional chairs. In addition to the seven original professorships there are now a much greater number of honorary professorships.

With the increase in the length of the term and an increase in the teaching staff, there has grown up a remarkable change in the mode of instruction, and this is especially observable in the effort to make the course as practical as possible. The student now has much laboratory-work, class-demonstrations, bedside ward-training, and daily special and general clinics; and yet with all this there never was a greater rush for post-graduate opportunities in the shape of hospital-appointments than now. For a time the faculties of our colleges took no hand in these scrimmages; but they soon learned that it was no small honor to the college to be rep-

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resented in our best hospitals, and hence, during the final year of college-work, students that expect to apply for hospital-appointments are subjected to special training, and a professional quiz is regularly instituted with a view to give special opportunities to those desiring them.

Prior to the present year the diploma of any of our chartered medical schools was the only requirement by law for the general practice of one's profession in Pennsylvania; but the present State law makes a diploma only a passport to the Board of State Medical Examiners.

And what has been the result of the great increase of professional chairs, the rivalry for hospital-appointments, and the creation of a State Board of Medical Examiners? The answer is only too apparent, viz., to increase the hardships of the medical student. Hard and unsatisfactory as it was when he could get his degree in two years, it is doubly hard and far more oppressive under the extended course. He hears conflicting theories in the lecture-room, and sees the results of conflicting treatment in the daily clinics. He is expected to pass an examination upon oral demonstrations, oral class-instruction, oral lectures and clinics from a score of specialists, and must depend wholly upon notes, meager and almost too hastily taken to be deciphered, with no time or strength to rewrite or correct them. A day, a single week at longest, is enough to convince the ablest student that he will have no time to read, take notes, think, digest, or remember, and that he must hire someone to do all this for him. Hence has sprung up indispensable

accessories to the class-room, viz., the quiz-masters. Sharp, shrewd, wonderfully well-posted men! Men who know the foibles, the vanities, the eccentricities of instructors, and who are masters of the minutest detail of every subject—walking encyclopedias, with patience and forbearance suited to their callings. Quiz-masters have existed for a century, but never before were they absolutely essential throughout a whole course to the best and ablest students. It is not necessary to go into the details of their work. I simply say to those who took their degrees fifteen or twenty years ago, that they can have no idea of the quiz-system of to-day. I will pass over the quizzing throughout the session, and only allude to a single branch. Each student knows a week or so before his final examination when he is to “come up,” and for this he is taken under special training. For nine mortal hours, with refreshments to prevent interruptions, into the small hours of the morning the entire special branch is reviewed. Then a rest of one night and a second review for an equal length of time. Incredible as this may seem, I may add to its incredibility by saying that the student after all this will often sit up all night and study to the last moment before the final ordeal of examination. And this is only for one branch; and the same work must be repeated before each final examination. If he fails on a single branch, he is re-quizzed and comes up a second time. All of this for his diploma; then special quizzing for hospital-appointments; and finally, the last and most feared of all, the State Board!

Let us now glance for a moment at the student of

law. In some of our schools he has but a single lecture a day, and is at liberty to spend the remainder with a preceptor or in an office. In some schools he has three lectures a day for five days a week. About equal to this are the three daily lectures of the theological student. In the high school, academies, and literary colleges, three recitations a day form the maximum requirement. Compare this with the minimum work of the medical student, who spends between sixty and seventy hours a week in actual, indispensable work. Of all students, the medical student is the only one who has no Sabbath.

And now, what of the final result? Does the law-student fail to get his diploma? Does the theological student fail? Either may fail, but only when extremely lazy, or under grave charges of misdemeanor. It is, indeed, rare that the entire class is not graduated. Very different is the result in our medical schools. In these 10 per cent. at least of every graduating class fail to get their degree; 10 per cent., after paying for three courses of medical instruction, three years' maintenance, and three years' loss of time.

Why, it may be asked, do so many fail?

One fruitful cause of failure is the utter unfitness of the student for his work. This should be ascertained at the preliminary examinations, which in medical schools are notoriously farcical. Think of "throwing" a man at his final examination because he cannot spell or write grammatically! What earthly likelihood is there that a student will pass the severest possible examinations on a score of scientific

subjects when his early advantages are too meager and too imperfect to gain him entrance to the high school?

A second reason for failure is that the professor knows little or nothing of the student before he appears before him for his final examinations. This is not so in our literary colleges. In these it is the daily, weekly, monthly, class-room work that tells, and while I have no authority for stating it, I venture the remark that any student at the highest literary college in the land might fail in the final examinations of each year, and yet receive the diploma of the college upon his honest, faithful, conscientious class-room work, and what is more, his classmates would applaud the action.

Finally, students fail from sheer exhaustion. The long hours of work, often in foul and ill-ventilated rooms; the long tension of mind, unrelieved by the slightest relaxation; the magnitude of his work, with increasing perplexities every year, and the constantly menacing horror, that after all he may fail of getting his diploma, rob him of sleep and render him almost imbecile at the moment when his faculties should be freshest and brightest. Many a man fails that two months before would have passed the ordeal triumphantly.

If the law of the State demands a four years' course of instruction at a medical school, if the law demands a diploma as the only possible passport to the Board of Medical Examiners, it seems only fair that some more legislation is needed to give the student that justice which heretofore has never been meted out to him.

At the first alumni meeting of the Jefferson Medical College, after Dr. Keen had been made professor of surgery, he narrated a conversation he had with a young man that had failed in his final examinations: "I told him that I felt guilty; that I felt that I had money that belonged to him." I presided at that meeting, and as Professor Keen sat down I said: "That is the best speech that I ever heard at an alumni meeting." There is a suggestion in this that I would commend to those who make the laws of our State. If the law compels a young man to study four years, it ought to give him some guarantee that he will be fairly dealt with. Were our medical schools compelled to refund one-half the expenses of the student who fails to get his diploma, if the schools were obliged to refund all moneys expended on lectures, the graduating class would not be reduced in numbers, but the 10 per cent. that fail at their final examinations would have some redress. Many of these would be checked at their preliminary examinations, while the deserving would get more consideration. But this is not all. Were medical schools held to a strict accountability for their courses of instruction they would soon come to a comparison of their methods with the methods of other educational institutions, and the result would be less quantity but better quality, few failures and better men.