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EXAMINATIONS AS A PATH TO FREEDOM

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Examinations have few friends. The sport of every youthful reformer who has a mind to cut afresh the face of the world, they have even been known to exasperate others less immature, who in the passage of time have grown impatient with any form of restraint of the teacher. But if there is much of the warfare against examinations that is not to be taken too tragically, I am not disposed to brush aside so lightly a body of criticism that has or appears to have behind it the whole weight of the English school of physiology. We must be impressed not only by what is said but by those who say it. And if we are not unmindful that dreamers and idealists are not always the safest company in settling the affairs of a workaday world, if we do not forget that it is more satisfying to plan a Utopia than to worry out a working compromise durable for the day, we cannot refuse to lend our ears to a case of such considerable parentage.

The critics could begin their case with a disconcerting fact, by reminding us that nearly half the students who enter quarterly for the final examinations of the Conjoint Board are rejected.* Such a formidable casualty list is not to be ascribed to a mere want of diligence—there is enough of that; it is only explicable on two counts, either the raw material or our own handling of that material must be at fault. But if the student was never fitted for medicine it is scarcely fair to postpone the discovery of that fact until his fifth year, and if the handling of the student be the cause of his failure we ourselves must have sinned either as teacher or as examiner. Are not we in London one and the same person? Dr. Jekyll in his hospital says these men are fit and ready to be examined, and then taking up his hat and coat he is translated to the examination hall where he becomes the sinister Mr. Hyde who pronounces quite another verdict. We cannot whitewash both the test and the training. If the measure be sound the training we measure is manifestly unsound, and if the teacher is in the dock he has no business to sit on the bench. As for the examiner's lament over his victim, his writing, his grammar, his general ignorance, let him cease his prattling: if he thinks there is something wrong with the raw material let him do something about the entrance standards which alone can bring a remedy, but if he can find no fault there then let him acknowledge in all humility that he himself is the culprit either as examiner or teacher. He is quite frankly abusing the powers committed to him. As an examiner he is asking for a level of education which as teacher he finds it impossible to

realize, and while he is using examinations as a means of duress magnifying their importance men are asking with growing insistence if they can rely on them.

The Reliability of Examinations

With that sceptical attitude I shall not quarrel, for there was a danger of examinations becoming a fetish. Save the King and Parliament there is hardly a man in England who would be where he is without the assistance of some examination. It was Jeremy Bentham, I think, who first proposed that Government posts should be filled by competitive tests, and if by a democracy we mean government of the people by the people and for the people he planned better than he knew. For since his day the examination system has become a ladder up which any boy of parts can climb out of an elementary school into the most desirable places of this green and pleasant land. He begins at the age of eleven with the Special Place Examination in order that he may pass from his elementary school to a secondary school. The order of merit in the examination is important to him not only because the number of places in the secondary schools is limited but also because that order may bring him financial assistance. Something like half a million children will compete with him for places. Four or five years later at the age of 16 he will sit with nearly seventy thousand others for the School Leaving Certificate which opens up a path to the professions, to the universities, and to many posts in the business world. These two examinations serve a double purpose: they supply a stimulus to the pupil and they meet the aspirations of a democracy to "la route ouverte aux talents." Between them they decide the fate in life of a large proportion of the youth of England. They are the two bolts that hold together the machinery of the schools, and if they fall out the machinery would not work.

It was into this examination-ridden world that some sceptics bearing household names in educational circles threw their bombs. Professor Valentine in a book on *The Reliability of Examinations* published in 1932 asked this question, "Do the pupils who do best in the entrance examination at 11 years of age also do best in the school leaving certificate at 16 years?" His answer is so disturbing that I give it in his own words. "There was no resemblance between the two orders of merit, no tendency for the boys high in the entrance examination to be high in the school certificate . . . the entrance examination in the years studied gave practically no guidance as to how the various pupils would do in their

* Forty per cent. is a common mortality.

school careers or in the examination at the end of that career." It is hardly surprising that heads of secondary schools report that one-fifth of their pupils prove unsuitable for a secondary school course.

Sir Michael Sadler's committee in 1935 was much concerned with the school leaving certificate. They found that in Latin "the individual examiners adopted very different standards," while in French and chemistry "the fate of a candidate depended very largely on the particular examiner to whom his paper was assigned." When the fourteen experienced examiners who corrected the history papers were given the same papers after an interval of a year they were found to have changed their verdict of pass or fail in nearly half the candidates. No process of measurement the committee concluded "can be valid when it yields such discrepant results in the hands of the same examiners on two different occasions. A test of this kind cannot inspire confidence." I have taken one example out of many recorded in a book *The Marks of Examiners*. Those who have undertaken this investigation do not demand the abolition of examiners. On the contrary they believe they are necessary. They believe that in general success in examinations and in after-life are connected, and in particular that success in examinations implies a certain type of ability and even certain qualities of character. They will be satisfied if examiners are led by their inquiry to review their methods, that they may cut down to a minimum if they can never entirely remove from examinations the element of chance.

Luck has of course never been absent from examinations; that it is a serious factor is something new. It is not easy to convey to a medical reader the impact on the educational world of that exposure. I can only liken it to the effect of Darwin's disclosures on the ecclesiastical mind of the early 'sixties. It was positively blasting. But the draught has not yet reached the medical schools. The physician and surgeon teach as they examine, by the light of nature. They have never bothered their heads about the technique of either. Teaching is their job, often their daily job; but it is only one of many activities, it is not their life. They are curiously remote from the teaching world, its problems, prejudices, and interests, and such intimations of human fallibility as reached them came via the more popular Press for which they have long learnt to make allowances. We went on as before.

The Teacher's Case Against Examinations

There is one reason before all others why we should listen to the argument of those who think so meanly of examinations. In substance they assert that they are not genuine educational tests at all but mere feats of memory. Certainly they disclose whether the student knows this or that, but taken alone they cannot interpret to outsiders how well he has been educated. The critic steadfastly declines to confuse education with the mere assimilation of facts, and he bitterly complains that because of the system he cannot teach the things that really matter to him and are as he believes truly educational.

Let a hospital physician who has the teaching art give forth that at a certain hour he will talk about three cases of aortic regurgitation, or of enlargement of the spleen, or of any other disease associated with advanced physical signs, and his audience will be inconveniently large. But if he seek to attract them to the out-patient department where by practice and precept he can explain the gentle art of questioning, the testing of the credibility of witnesses, the slow unfolding of the manner in which each patient with the smallest encouragement will out of his own mouth tell you his diagnosis—all this, the much neglected art of medicine, will be a matter between

himself and two or three students. The mob came because they felt that the ward demonstration was going to help them in the ordeal before them. They would be given a case with advanced physical signs. They would be asked about these signs with a few other conventional questions arising out of them. But what could all this talk in the out-patient department on cases without signs, clinical rubbish, profit them? Wherever I look I see teaching being reduced to a drill by the clamant demands of examinations. And that I conceive to be altogether a most serious objection whatever we may think of its validity; for indeed what can it profit if a teacher is kept busy imparting what in his eyes is of little moment?

The Teacher's Panacea

Let us then look a little more carefully into what the critics of examinations have to offer as an alternative. Do they or do they not in their hearts concede that it is the duty of the State to exact a certain standard of competence in the public interest, that examinations in some form or other are necessary evils? If they do not, if they are not disposed for a moment to dally with compromise, if in hope and faith they are prepared to put all to the touch and are utterly and finally opposed to examinations in any form whatsoever, I shall have little desire to quarrel with them, for from the element of compulsion in education no good thing can come. We are dealing with an adult Englishman and to get the best out of him we must appeal to the best that is in him. He will not be policed; he must always rebel against the whole system of small insurances that we take out against the natural waywardness of youth. He might well ask, Have all these petty restrictions and doubts and hesitations any lawful place in the care and management of grown men?

Alas, the critics shrink from such an issue, meekly accepting the inevitability of some form of compulsion. It would appear that they are not out after all to abolish the element of compulsion, but only to exercise it in another form. What do they ask of us? If, they say, these things must be, if opinion in the profession and outside it is not yet ripe for the total abolition of examinations, if a start should be made, when it is made, in branches of learning less vital to the public weal, then let the teachers examine their own students: Guy's at Guy's and King's at King's. They will not dispute that examinations are necessary evils, but let them be internal and not external. They will not deny that some form of compulsion or hold over the student's ways is necessary, but let it be exercised by the teacher and not by the examiner. They know their students, outsiders cannot. Wherefore they will be better able to say which shall pass and which fail. The logical issue of an argument of that kind is to damn all examinations, rather than to exalt one form over another, for this knowledge will come to us not in one day in a few hours' examining, but more gradually through months and years of contact with the student in the classroom and in the laboratory. Indeed they admit as much when they demand that the student's class books should be taken into account in deciding whether he pass or fail. It is the school system of marks, he is a schoolboy and no more to be trusted. It is an attempt to substitute for examinations a greater tyranny which shall parcel out a student's working life so that he is accountable to one man for this hour and to another for that and can call no time his own. It will put a premium on what is called "signing up," on faithful attendance at lectures and the like.

This is a road to freedom which is beset with pitfalls. The precious leisure which we are planning to restore to the student is if they have their way to be eaten up more than ever in the treadmill of the classroom.

For if the teacher has his way the more conscientious he is the more he will tighten his hold on the student's time, since he and he alone is now responsible to the public that the young graduate is fit and safe to practise medicine. He will undertake that the boy does not waste his time and that the public does not suffer. But, alas, no two men are agreed, certainly not the teacher and the pupil, on what really constitutes wasting time. I cannot lose sight of the liberty of the student in a crusade for the freedom of the teacher, and I think examinations less hurtful than anything that is likely to replace them. They are often unfair, they foster coaching, they may even go far to defeat the true underlying educational motive; but they do check the foibles and chasten the zeal and sharpen the sense of proportion of teachers who are enthusiasts or nothing. They worry the students but they also protect them. What man of parts if the decision must be taken will long hesitate between an occasional test and a daily despotism that watches over every minute of his working hours? A conclusion of that kind, so strangely at variance with the judgement of many of the most progressive minds, has driven me to search for support elsewhere than in my own experience. Flexner on other grounds is even less friendly to the reformers, "If invariably conscientious teachers moved in sufficiently wide orbits the function of examining could be delegated to the schools, but that plan is not feasible; it cannot be said to work satisfactorily in Germany or elsewhere." Flexner is concerned with questions of public polity, while I am only anxious to rescue for the student a little breathing space, a short respite from their plans for his betterment.

And now in the manner of Hazlitt I must turn on my tracks. I have set forth at length the dangers inherent in the examination of students by their own teachers just as they were written in my scrapbook ten years ago. If I have come slowly to accept internal examinations in some form or other as inevitable and the lesser of two evils it is not because I think those dangers are less real than they were. But I can see no other way of checking the influence of the examination system over the student's training, or of eliminating that emphasis on detail which has become an obsession in our medical schools.

Selection of Examiners

But if I am to contrive some sort of defence of examinations I can accept no brief for them as they are, but only as they might be made. I am concerned to argue not that these tests are harmless, but that they are necessary and could be made less harmful if they were applied by the right people, in the right form, for the right purpose. It is perhaps not so much the examination system that is at fault, though it is at best a measure of expediency, but rather that we seek to administer it in such a Gilbertian fashion. Our judicial system itself could scarcely survive the indiscriminate elevation to the bench of every successful lawyer. Yet we seem to believe that each one of us who has been appointed to a teaching staff for quite other purposes is competent to examine, though we do not admit that the gift is bestowed until late in life, presumably as a kind of compensation for the failure of our other powers.

Is it so simple? To frame a question that determines whether a candidate knows a particular fact is not difficult, to shape that inquiry so that we may learn how he has been educated and what is his ability to reason and to observe is another story. We have been so busy with the merit of a candidate's answer that we have been apt to overlook the quality of the examiner's question. Before me are the questions set in the year 1931 for Winchester scholarships and those for a qualifying exam-

ination in medicine. The Winchester examiners are little concerned with what boys can remember, this only they ask, "Can Winchester make anything of this boy?" The questions in the medical paper are taken from a stockpot, and the main preoccupation of the examiners when they set the paper might have been that the same questions had not been asked at any rate in the immediate past. They are not a measure of native ability but an attempt to ensure that what has been read in books has not since been forgotten. They are a test of memory because the education they are measuring was also a test of memory.

If it is given to few to ask the right question, certainly not everyone can ask it in the right way. There are men whose temperament, whose want of imagination unfits them for the examining art.

"Tis the fool that feels not,
Wisdom is full of pity."

But Euripides is Greek to the practical fellow who confidently proposes to assess in a few minutes a preparation which has been spread over three years, and that with the candidate on the edge of his chair. If, Reader, you were sent in to bat on your village green, and the ball was handed to Larwood would it help you to settle down if the over was not allowed to count? There are plenty of Larwoods who hurl their thunderbolts at their man before he is set. By way of extenuation they add, "I did not expect him to know that." But the candidate did not know it was a no-ball. Or perhaps with infinite weariness the examiner asks to what school his victim belongs as if in no other way could he mark the profundity of his displeasure. We willingly agree that the unfortunate student may be the victim of the system, we rarely reflect that he is at the mercy of those who administer it.

An examination is but a form of criticism, and the good examiner like the good critic has to find out what a man knows not what he does not know. That is his business, he has no other. It is the beginning and end of all wisdom in examinations. An examination is an impression, it is an instrument which by its very nature is rough and ready, but we insist on regarding it as a weapon of precision. A mood, a mere shade of emphasis, which finds its expression in a plus sign may mean the difference between safety and disaster. We "measure with a barge-pole and then worry over millimetres." It should not be difficult to arrange that all candidates whose fate is uncertain are given a supplementary oral examination, a chance to prove their case. It follows that in these ordeals a Dean is of necessity the prisoner's friend. He can never see a man plucked for want of a mark without disquiet: was it a last chance, and if he had come on Tuesday instead of Monday might he too have been a doctor?

Examinations Used for the Wrong Purpose

But even if we could contrive that only such examinees as are competent to outwit the ingenuity of tutorial coaching, even if the actual form of the examination be as little hurtful as may be to the underlying educational motive that is the end of all we plan, examinations will still pervert the true aim of the student's life if they are used for the wrong purpose. We do not look to them to create educational ideals any more than we turn to the police force for schemes of social betterment. Both, born of human frailty, are but temporary expedients. The public require that if a medical degree or diploma confers the right to practise it shall also guarantee a measure of competence; the legitimate purpose of medical examinations is simply to furnish the public with those assurances. But in effect they are

employed to other ends, where the safety of the public is no longer in question. They are used to tell us not whether this man is safe or tolerably safe, but whether he is likely to profit by the exceptional opportunities of study that a staff appointment offers. And this they do by testing the conscientious acquisition of the known and not by encouraging an excursion on however modest a scale into the unknown. So we set up wrong standards in the student's mind, and in the spring of his intellectual life when growth is in the air he ceases to want to do anything, he remains passive, he is content to listen.

We ask of those schools which are groping towards an ideal that they should make a beginning by raising the standards that admit to their school and by abolishing all such qualifications for election to their staff as may be obtained by examination. Then, when we no longer turn to examinations that we may learn from them of the promise and fulfilment of ambitious youth, we may go a step further to inquire if they are not still used for purposes for which they were at no time meant. For what is the cause of all these failures in the final examinations? Is it not that we are trying to force a result? We are persistently asking for a level which the primary

education of the victims makes impossible. The examiners and the architects of the curriculum pursue faithfully the same policy; are they not the same people holding the same educational ideals? The student during his hospital years is to hoard a reserve of facts on which he is to hibernate for the rest of his life. Wherefore the more facts he can be made to swallow the better armed is he to practise medicine. So the curriculum adds subject after subject and the examiner steps in to lend a hand by holding over the student the menace that he may be questioned on any or every detail within its vast complexity. And in that fashion we shall continue until there is a more just appraisal of the true objects of medical education, when it shall be part of our living creed that the medical school begins rather than completes this education which seeks to train and foster a habit of thought, an attitude of mind. Are we not perhaps a little too ready to blame examinations for all the defects of our educational system? More intelligent examining will soon follow more intelligent teaching. While teachers conceive that salvation is only to be found in a process of fattening, examiners who are the teachers will use their powers to whet the student's appetite.

THE PROFESSION OF MEDICINE

In accordance with long-standing custom we preface the main contents of the annual Educational Number of the *British Medical Journal* with some remarks by way of guidance to those who contemplate entering the profession of medicine. What is said here will follow the lines laid down in previous years; but readers of each subsequent section should bear in mind that not only the methods of medical education but even its purpose are still under close scrutiny in responsible quarters. The medical curriculum is, indeed, a subject of discussion to-day in nearly every country of the world.

THE STUDENT'S CURRICULUM

A revision of the medical curriculum has been under consideration for the last three years. Four important reports on medical education have been issued—the final report of the American Commission; the report of the British Medical Association's Committee; a Bulletin on "Medical Education and the Reform of Medical Studies" issued under the auspices of the Health Organization of the League of Nations; and the report of a Conference of Representatives of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London, the Royal College of Physicians of London, the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and the Society of Apothecaries of London. They may be said to be essentially at one as to the main points in which reform is required. So far as relates to the British position, there is common agreement that it is undesirable to lengthen the five years' medical course, but it is recognized that the course should be regarded as beginning at the time when the study of human anatomy and physiology is entered upon, and that this should be at approximately the age of 18 years—slightly later than is permitted under the present regulations. It is held, further, that a higher standard of general education than the present minimum should be required of those entering upon this course; that the requirements as to knowledge of the basic sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology should be modified and extended; that instruction in psychology, genetics, and methods of clinical examination should be introduced into the first two years of the curriculum; that the course

should be regarded as a whole, with greater co-operation among the teachers of the several subjects, and not divided into segregated departments; and that, throughout, the preventive and psychological aspects of medicine, the living human personality in health, the sociological duties required from medical practitioners, should receive more prominent attention than has hitherto been common. The matter has now been carried further, and at its meeting last May the General Medical Council passed new resolutions and recommendations carrying into effect the suggestions just enumerated. These are to come into force on January 1st, 1938. Though the new pre-registration requirements will not apply to students entering on their studies before that date such students may well familiarize themselves with the changes which become operative before their period of study is completed. It must be remembered that the powers of the General Medical Council are limited, and that quite as much depends upon the action of licensing bodies and medical school authorities as upon the Council. Indeed it may be said that, whatever regulations and minimum requirements are laid down, and however admirable are the arrangements set out in the prospectus of a university or teaching body, success depends upon the ability and inspiration of the teacher and an adequate response on the part of the student.

FINGER-POSTS

The first object of the Educational Number, 1936, is to inform prospective students and their parents of the steps that must be taken in order to become a registered medical practitioner under the existing order of things. The second is to assist those wishing to know what a medical career has to offer, and others who, having already decided to study medicine, are uncertain about the line of work for which they are best suited. This introductory article gives an opportunity of touching upon some aspects of medical study and practice, and of directing attention to a few points that might not occur to anyone without experience of the medical life.