STS 50th Anniversary – Looking Back, Moving Forward

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“History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.” – David C. McCullough

Dr. Thomas B. Ferguson began his Presidential Address, “Guilds, Boards, and Hobgoblins” [Ann Thorac Surg 1977;24:6-18] by stating his purpose, which was to examine the system of medical specialty boards to help us better understand the future of graduate medical education. He discussed six lessons from history to help us understand the future.

We were reminded that King Henry VIII of England began to bring order to the surgical ranks by uniting the barbers and surgeons through an act of Parliament in 1540. The Company of Barber-Surgeons was set up as a structured trade organization, or guild. They established a Court of Examiners to administer an oral examination, which represented the first formal attempt at quality assessment of surgical trainees in the English-speaking world.

Subsequently, King George II created an independent Company of Surgeons in 1745. The influence of this company declined over the next five decades, and in 1800 the company was transformed into the Royal College of Surgeons of London. According to Dr. Ferguson, the primary explanation for the decline in the influence of the company was the fact that their Court of Examiners “took little interest in anything but the examination” of candidates. Dr. Ferguson pointed this out as history lesson number one.

By the mid-1800s, the Royal College of Surgeons was responsible for the certification of qualified individuals. Parliament was involved at that time and was interested in the licensure of practitioners. Dr. Ferguson pointed out this separation of responsibilities as history lesson number two.

He went on to describe the formation of the Association of American Medical Colleges in 1876 to upgrade teaching standards and the formation of the American College of Surgeons in 1913 to identify surgical specialists, upgrade hospitals, and control fee splitting. He noted that these early reforms occurred internally, without government intervention, and were accomplished 50 years later than they should have been. This was history lesson number three.

Lesson number four was related to the formation of the American specialty board system, beginning with the American Board for Ophthalmic Examinations in 1916. Its primary architect, Dr. Edward Jackson, recommended that two years of study should be required before one could take the examination.
According to Dr. Ferguson, this was the “first stipulated period of training after the M.D. degree. It was to change all graduate medical education.”

After World War II, specialization flourished and additional specialty boards were founded. The Advisory Board for Medical Specialties was formed in 1933 and was later reorganized as the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) in 1970. Dr. Ferguson discussed the autonomy that each board holds and the reluctance that groups of physicians have to work with other groups outside their own area of interest. This constituted history lesson number five.

Dr. Ferguson then discussed the valuable contributions of the American Medical Association, which authorized the Flexner Report in 1910 and the Millis Report in 1966. The former report achieved much by stimulating reform of medical education, whereas the latter made a similar contribution to graduate medical education. Dr. Ferguson commented that “both reports were important and far reaching, in large part because they contained independent views from within and outside the profession.” He went on to say that “medicine should recognize the value of advice from sources beyond the medical community.” This was history lesson number six.

Subsequently, the importance of certification by specialty boards was spelled out by acknowledging that in the 1930s, the American Hospital Association recommended that specialty certificates be used in delineating hospital privileges. Dr. Ferguson stated that “for the physician in a specialty practice, what used to be a badge of excellence is now a required charter.” He discussed his recommendations concerning the place of the specialty boards in the future. He pointed out that boards must have a purpose that is “broader than the administration of certifying examinations,” and they must confront the “changing image and use of the certificate.”

He called on specialty boards to be “responsible for initiating and supporting needed reforms” and to “assume leadership in the shaping and future direction of graduate medical education.” He also recommended that each board “relinquish a degree of autonomy in order to strengthen the ABMS.” Finally, he suggested that boards define their “expanded role in the medical scene and reorganize its board structure accordingly.” He reminded us of the importance of representation from persons outside the specialty.

Dr. Ferguson suggested that if all this was accomplished, the specialty boards would become more influential, and by playing a vital role, graduate medical education would be improved. He stated that the Residency Review Committees should continue to approve training programs, but the “boards should function so as to make certain all aspects of resident training in approved programs are sound.” If this were accomplished, then the certifying examination would be eliminated. Furthermore, he suggested that “specialty certification be dignified by the appropriate letters behind the M.D. degree.” Dr. Ferguson reminded us that the “times are changing and the system must change with the times.”

He wrapped up with some personal observations, beginning with the potential for conflict between the concerns of practitioners regarding illness and those of the population concerning health. He stated that “our corporate strength is humanism” and emphasized the importance of the one-on-one relationship between the physician and the patient. He ended his address by quoting the wife of a patient who died: “There is yet a limit to technology; there is none to humanity, beyond our own making.” May we endeavor to commit ourselves to a limitless humanity.