

VIEWPOINTS

The 21st Century Abraham Flexner

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Pharmacy needs an Abraham Flexner for the 21st century to remind us of the standards that are most important to pharmacy education. Every pharmacy academician should know about Abraham Flexner and the “Flexner Report” published in 1910 that was a critical evaluation of colleges of medicine.¹ The report challenged the existence of substandard medical schools and resulted in the closing of many of them over the next 20-30 years.

Most of Flexner’s standards and expectations of medical education are still relevant today to medicine as well as pharmacy and other health disciplines. In his era there was a proliferation of proprietary medical schools. Many medical schools were small trade schools, run mainly for profit. Often, they were not associated with hospitals or established universities. Flexner railed against medical schools that had lax admission standards, faculty members who were poorly trained local doctors as opposed to physicians who were fully trained in the science of medicine, part-time professors as opposed to full-time clinical instructors, and tedious lectures in large classes that inhibited learning. According to his biographer Thomas Neville Bonner, Flexner worried that “the imposition of rigid standards by accrediting groups was making the medical curriculum a monstrosity,” with medical students moving through it with “little time to stop, read, work or think.” The description is both a picture of the times 100 years ago and a mirror to our present age. There are many parallel comparisons between the medical schools of 1900 and the pharmacy schools of today.

Flexner was not a physician but a secondary school teacher and educational reformer. In fact, he had never been in a medical school before beginning his study. However, he had well founded ideas of what medical education should be like and he rigorously applied these views to his evaluations. He visited all 155 colleges in the US and Canada over a few months. Flexner believed that modern medical education should be a union of practice with the scientific method. The scientific method produced problem solvers—what we might call “critical thinkers” today—not merely practitioners of a trade.

Pharmacy schools have entered an era of unsustainable growth, often fueled by institutional desires for “economic impact” or the profit that can be derived from a large class of pharmacy students. Schools exist with a handful of full-time faculty members and modest facilities not integrated with health care centers, as long as there is a large cadre of volunteer instructors for practice experiences. Many schools are now only nominally affiliated with academic health centers and many faculty members and students visit health care sites rather than actually provide care as part of an organized health system. The lack of adequate numbers of faculty members has resulted in the hiring of many individuals with minimal training in teaching who are given little time and support to pursue the sciences of pharmacy as a foundation for practice. A diminished emphasis on the science of our profession encourages a trade school mentality.

We would surely benefit from a 21st century Flexner to take a critical look at schools of pharmacy in the United States, both new and old, and remind us of the importance of our scientific foundations and primary purpose to serve the public. The Flexner of today would insist that quality pharmacy education should be built on:

- A faculty that actively engages in scholarship to assure that the profession continues to progress and does not become a “trade.”
- Functional integration with (not just affiliation with) academic health centers, as these are the centers of learning in health professions.
- A faculty that actively engages in providing health care with a primary mission of public service.
- A curriculum that promotes learning through active participation rather than through lectures on factual knowledge, which is an approach Flexner would have recognized as boring and ineffective.

Where the Flexner of our era will come from is not apparent. Perhaps as Flexner was, he or she should be an outsider to the profession. Wherever he or she comes from, the 21st century Flexner is needed now for pharmacy to sort out the differences between professional and trade school education.

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REFERENCES

1 Bonner TN. *Iconoclast: Abraham Flexner and a Life in Learning*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; 2002.