

THE FLEXNER REPORT

Excerpted from my book *Abraham Flexner: A Flawed American Icon*.

In 1905 and nearing forty years of age, Abraham Flexner was growing restless in his home town of Louisville. The college preparatory school for wealthy boys that he'd opened fifteen years earlier was so successful that his wife complained, "If we don't watch out we shall become rich. Then where would we be?" Abe wrote to his older brother Simon who recently had been appointed head of the Rockefeller Institute in New York City, "I am fastened here like Prometheus on his rock with grinding routine that is almost as hard on the liver as a vulture's beak." Impulsively, he closed "Mr. Flexner's School" and decided to resume his own education - first a year at Harvard and then two years at universities in Berlin and Heidelberg.

In 1908, having exhausted his funds, he returned to America with a new focus on higher education but no job in sight. His first book, *The American College: A Criticism* (1908) was a scathing critique of the prevailing lecture style which enabled colleges to "handle cheaply by wholesale a large body of students that would otherwise be unmanageable." In it Flexner suggested that the rigid curricula then generally being employed stifled creativity and made no sense. Students should not be distracted by athletics or other extra-curricula activities: "The task of universities is to give society not what it wants, but what it needs...intellectual inquiry, not job training [is] the purpose of the university." As for himself, a career in teaching was not in the cards. Years later he recalled, "Somehow I came to feel that I was not meant to be a college professor...with all my reverence for learning - and this can hardly be exaggerated, I came to know that my interests were too broad to satisfy with what is now called "a field of concentration." Soon opportunity arrived from an unexpected source.

Henry S. Pritchett, the president of the new Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, took notice of Flexner's book and was impressed. In 1908 the American Medical Association's Council on Medical Education commissioned the Foundation to perform a detailed study of American medical schools. A pilot study had revealed

uniformly low educational standards, especially in the large number of proprietary schools, and the Foundation was selected to be a neutral party. President Pritchett's own agenda was to upgrade and recast the professional life in America based on the authority of knowledge and skill. When Pritchett invited the obscure young reformer to head the study, Abraham's first reaction was that they must have confused him with his well known brother the doctor. But Pritchett wanted an unbiased lay educator with "an unfettered mind" to take a hard look at the facts and then suggest a plan for reformulating medical education along more scientific lines. Professional schools should be studied not from the point of view of the practitioner but from the standpoint of the educator.

Some Carnegie Foundation board members questioned Pritchett's choice of this unknown layman. Moreover, there were rumors that the young man was hard to get along with. Asked to provide a character reference, Harvard's Dr. William Councilman reported:

I have not known Mr. A. Flexner well, but I have liked what I have seen of him. I should think he might be somewhat erratic and probably hasty to judgment, but a very able and valuable man for all that. I think it more or less easy to explain why he should not be a persona grata to many of the men at Harvard at present, for his book criticized many of the conditions at the college and I have never found that men take very kindly to criticism especially when it comes from outside.

The Carnegie Foundation appointed Flexner to their research staff and between January 1909 and April 1910 he personally visited all 155 schools throughout the United States and Canada, usually accompanied by a member of the AMA's Council on Education. Sometimes he revisited institutions so the total number of visits actually was 175, most done within an eight month period. Never previously having set foot in a medical school, he was determined to learn everything about them by "going about swiftly." He used no standard questionnaire and sometimes investigations were made

unannounced. Generally he was well received, perhaps because as Carnegie's emissary his hosts felt that making a good impression might lead to subsidies.

When Flexner's findings were published in June 1910, they caused a sensation; fifteen thousand copies were distributed free and summaries provided to popular magazines. Henry Pritchett wrote the Report's Introduction and his blunt comments gave a sense of what would follow:

For twenty-five years past there has been an enormous over-production of uneducated and ill trained medical practitioners. This has been in absolute disregard of the public welfare and without any serious thought of the interests of the public. Taking the United States as a whole, physicians are four or five times as numerous in proportion to population as in older countries like Germany. Over-production of ill-trained men is due in the main to the existence of a very large number of commercial schools sustained in many cases by advertising methods through which a mass of unprepared youth is drawn out of industrial occupations into the study of medicine.

With few exceptions medical schools were private ventures conducted for profit. Applicants who could pay the tuition seldom were turned down for lack of scholarship by unsavory "diploma mills" at a time when their certificates alone were a license to practice. At the turn of the century Johns Hopkins was the only medical school to require an undergraduate degree for entrance and 140 of the schools Flexner visited had no library. He described conditions at one college as "sordid, hideous, unintelligent even when honest - and so little that is even honest." These were typical assessments: California Medical College, "The school is a disgrace to the State whose law permits its existence." At Tufts Medical College (my alma mater), "Entrance requirement below an actual high school." In New York State, "Despite the university charter, the University of Buffalo is a fiction." In Georgia at the College of Eclectic Medicine and Surgery, "Nothing more disgraceful calling itself a Medical School can be found anywhere." A faculty member at North Carolina Medical College was quoted as saying, "It is idle to talk of

real laboratory work for students so ignorant and clumsy. Many of them, gotten through advertising, would make better farmers.”

Abraham Flexner's 389 page Bulletin No. 4, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada: A Report to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*, although never officially endorsed by the AMA was fully supported by them. They recommended that medical schools need to be properly equipped and linked to first-class hospitals, students must be well qualified and research should be “untrammelled by near reference to practical ends.” The Report's author's name has sometimes been used as an adjective “flexnerian.,” to signify strong support of basic science in medical school curricula. Abraham Flexner had a passion for order and efficiency and in subsequent works provided a clear road map for the future. What he envisioned was a close bond between the basic sciences, organized professional medicine and university education; faculty and administration united by their mutual goal of excellence in all things. Medical science should be taught in university settings so that graduates could better understand the world in which they and their patients lived - physicians should be broadly educated, not merely technicians, they needed to have “insight and empathy.”

There should be fewer but better physicians and the vast majority of schools eliminated or consolidated into stronger units. In fact, support for many of Flexner's ideas had been growing for years, but the Report's effect was sufficient that schools either would have to raise their standards or fail. The existence of many schools was precarious anyway and most quack schools already were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The Report provided a timely nudge. Although Flexner's goal for no more than thirty-one schools was never realized; by 1922 only eighty-one schools survived, most of them linked to universities - today there are 127.

Inevitably Abraham Flexner's comments created both friends and enemies and the Report was described variously as being “unfair,” “flippant,” “full of errors,” “impudent.” When criticized that many of his site visits had been cursory, Flexner responded, “You don't need to eat a whole sheep to know it's tainted.” One physician regretted that

Flexner had not been kicked down the front steps, that failure to do so was “a reflection on medical manhood.” There was one death threat. *The Medical Record*, a weekly journal, editorialized:

What the writer [Flexner] does not seem to have discovered is that all these schools, with the exception of a very small and practically negligible number, are in the process of betterment...When one realizes that the best of medical schools were 25 or 30 years ago, and what tremendous progress has been made during the past 20, and especially the past 10 years, and when one remembers that all this uplift has come within, without the help of any outside Foundation, the work of Mr. Flexner seems somewhat a waste of effort and a needless expenditure of Mr. Carnegie's hard earned money.

Latter day historians sometimes have argued that Flexner's personal influence was not as great as touted. Lester King, for one, began his critique, “The so-called Flexner Report...is probably the most grossly overrated document in American medical history...endowed with canonical status that has resulted in some horrendous distortion of the historical record.” Some critics scolded him as a dogmatic elitist who spent other people's money on his own pet projects. To be sure, the closing or merger of inferior schools eliminated many that provided training for women and minorities, but historian Howard Merkel has cautioned against the inclination to view history through today's prism: “The real issue is that the good old days were not that good anyway and to put it all on his lap is too much. American society was harsh and closed to women and blacks and remained that way for decades.”

Others chided the Report's author for not seeming to understand that there was an art of medicine as well as a science, e.g. “His [Flexner's] language leaves little doubt that he held the mass produced “family doctor” in low esteem and considered the *ne plus ultra* among physicians to be the highly scientific and sophisticated clinician moulded in the Hopkins environment or its equivalent.” Harvard's Francis Peabody complained that Flexner's approach weakened “the should of the clinic” and pleaded for a more patient-

oriented, less academic place to reach medical students and for “more of the spirit that gives life.” The eminent William Osler, now ensconced at Oxford but still loyal to his former colleagues at Johns Hopkins, criticized Flexner’s call for full-time clinical faculty which he described as the “climax of doctrinally madness.” Although Bulletin No. 4 had contained nothing about full-time faculty, this idea was integral to Flexner’s hidden agenda which soon leaked out and emerged as the most contentious area of discord. Osler excused Flexner’s “perhaps pardonable ignorance of a layman” but feared that his approach would begin “the evolution of a set of clinical prigs, the boundary of whose horizon would be the laboratory.” Concerning the implication that clinicians were profiting from the current system:

Do not be led away by the opinions of the pure laboratory men, who have no knowledge of the clinical situation and its needs. Against the sin of prosperity which looms large in Mr. Flexner’s Report, the clinical professor must battle hard. I was myself believed to be addicted to it...but I took out of Baltimore not one cent of all the fees...I received in the sixteen years of my work.

A measure of the enduring legacy of The Flexner Report is the fact that every twenty-five years or so since 1910, symposia and published reviews have appeared in order to assess progress in medical education and to list problems which still need to be addressed. On the occasion of the Report’s centennial in 2010, an entire issue of Academic Medicine was devoted to evaluating Flexner’s legacy. In one commentary historian Kenneth Ludmerer noted that for nearly a century Flexner had been both credited and blamed for things he did not do and suggested that some of his greatest contributions were unappreciated. Among these he had transformed medical education into a broad social movement, aligning it with John Dewey’s philosophy of “progressive” education - what worked at the elementary school level, learning by doing, was applicable at all educational levels.

Dr. Ludmerer attempted to dispel various myths associated with The Report including, “the fiction that little had transpired in medical education until Flexner “in one stunning

blow, modernized an anachronistic system.” He described Flexner as being more flexible than commonly supposed; rather, in his university-based, research-oriented conception no idea was too sacrosanct to reform or review. Flexner had written, “This solution deals only with the present and the near future - a generation at most. In the course of the next thirty years needs will develop of which we here take no account. As we cannot foretell them, we shall not endeavor to meet them.”

According to Ludmerer, Flexner’s gift to medical education and the medical profession was, and continues to be, an unswerving commitment to excellence and public service. Bulletin No. 4 was followed about two years later by Bulletin No. 6, also commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation, which was based on a whirlwind survey of medical education in England, France and Germany. As he later described,

I had worked on it as I had worked at the other, with unremitting zeal and at a pace that now seems to me as I look back, half mad. But those were glorious days. I was young, enthusiastic and strong, and every day brought me into contact with men of superior wisdom, culture and experience. Writing up my notes kept me at work till the small hours of the morning, for there were no secretaries in those days to whom one could dictate between teatime and dinner the results of a hard day spent in observation and discussion.

Abraham Flexner went on to lead a productive, if contentious career, first at the Rockefeller Foundation’s General Education Board and later at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton. Late in life he wrote not one but two self-serving autobiographies. When he died in 1959 at age 92, he was lauded in a front-page obituary in the New York Times: “No other American of his time contributed more to the welfare of his country and of humanity in general.” That’s a remarkable eulogy and although many of Abraham Flexner’s contemporaries would have disagreed, he outlived them all. Nevertheless, his iconic Report was substantially responsible for changing how medicine would be practiced during the 20th century and beyond.

