A History of the Topeka Dental College

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Among the lesser known dental schools of the United States was one that existed for a period of two years and was probably the last of the proprietary institutions to be founded. It was the Topeka Dental College, founded by Robert C. Hutcheson, D. D. S., M. D., in 1909. As far as it is known, no data of this institution have ever been recorded in dental historical or educational literature.

On June 11, 1909, articles of agreement were compiled for the establishment of the Topeka Dental College corporation by Alfred C. Sloan, Robert C. Hutcheson, William A. McCarter, John Henry Solecki, and Robert Sorren Magee, all of Topeka. Of the incorporators, all were dentists except Robert Sorren Magee, M. D., an oculist. All constituted the board of directors. The project was incorporated for $5,000, fifty shares at $100 each. Ownership was distributed as follows:

Robert C. Hutcheson 2 shares
William A. McCarter 2 shares
John Henry Solecki 2 shares
Robert Sorren Magee 1 share
Alfred C. Sloan 1 share

The articles of agreement were filed and a charter granted on June 14, 1909. The charter granted was for 50 years’ duration, and the school was to be located in Topeka. The purpose of the corporation was “to conduct a school of instruction in the science and art of dentistry.”

An agreement was effected with the Kansas Medical College (1890-1913), the medical department of Washburn College, for the Topeka Dental College to share the building and instructional facilities of the medical college, located at 521 Quincy street.

The first class opened October 5, 1909. The course in dentistry at that time was of three years’ duration, based upon three years of

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1. Frank J. Ryan, Secretary of State, Topeka, personal communication, July 19, 1947; “Corporation Charters (official copybooks from office of Secretary of State, now at Kansas State Historical Society),” v. 77, p. 89; The Western Dental Journal, Kansas City, Mo., v. 28, p. 783.

2. Clarke N. Mertz, D. D. S., Topeka, personal comment, July 26 and December 12, 1947; Polk’s Dental Register (Detroit, Baltimore and Chicago, 1910), pp. 45, 321; The Journal of the Kansas Medical Society, Kansas City, Kan., v. 9, p. 298.

3. Ibid.
high school preparation for entrance. The four matriculants in the first class—three men and one woman—were C. D. Lau, Alva Ricks, R. C. Stewart and Edna Rinehart. The basic science courses were taken with the medical students from medical instructors, while the four dentists who were incorporators were among those furnishing instruction in dental and technical subjects.

Since the dental school was dependent upon the medical school for housing as well as instructional facilities, its opportunity for growth and survival depended upon the future of the medical school. About that time medical education was undergoing an advancement in academic prerequisites for the study of medicine. By 1910 forty of a total of 131 medical schools had ceased to admit students with only a high school background and were requiring one to two years of acceptable college work for admittance. In 1912 the Council on Medical Education and Hospitals of the American Medical Association set the admission requirement, beginning in 1914, of a year of college work as a necessary requisite for a Class A rating for medical schools. In 1918 the requirement was advanced to two years of collegiate preparation. This trend toward higher entrance requirements for the study of medicine resulted in a gradual reduction in the number of schools, so that by 1915 only 96 were in existence.

Because of this increase in premedical education, many of the proprietary medical schools merged with university schools, while others, unable to obtain a suitable affiliation, voluntarily closed their doors. The Kansas Medical College, unable to conform to the new standards for a Class A rating, discontinued its sessions and merged with the University of Kansas School of Medicine in 1913.

The Topeka Dental College continued its activities for a period of two years, although only two new students—George Gilliam and F. H. Dowler—were matriculated for the year 1910-1911. In the spring of 1911, when it was patent that the Kansas Medical College would not continue much longer to exist because of the increasing entrance requirements for the study of medicine, the Topeka Dental College disbanded. The six students transferred to the Western

5. The Western Dental Journal, loc. cit.
8. Ibid., p. 504.
9. Ibid., p. 511.
10. Interview with Dr. Dowler, December 12, 1947.
Dental College of Kansas City, Mo., and received the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery from that institution. Robert C. Hutcheson, the dean and founder of the Topeka Dental College, joined the faculty of the Western Dental College, and remained there until it merged with the Kansas City Dental College in 1919.

In reviewing the history of the Topeka Dental College, it is obvious that there was not much need for this institution. Geographically, the area was well served by established schools at Omaha and Lincoln, Neb., and two schools at Kansas City, Mo. Why, then, was it established? That is a matter for conjecture. The golden era of commercialism in dental education represented a period from 1870 to 1900, when dental schools increased in number from ten to 57, the greatest number to exist since the beginning of formal dental education in 1840. Since 1900 there had been a gradual decrease in the number of commercial dental schools due to the power of university dental schools in resisting the proprietary influence in dental education. In view of the changes that were taking place at that time it is surprising that the Topeka Dental College ever was founded. It is apparent that there was not much opportunity in the light of a changing philosophy in dental education for this school to take root and survive.

11. Interviews with Dr. Mertz and Dr. Dowler.