Debates and Experiments:  
The Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh

Like other Scottish clubs and societies, this student-run organisation was a public forum where medical students could present their own papers and hone rhetorical skills. This essay is a first attempt to present and analyse the broad range of dissertations composed and presented during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The documents offer a valuable window into contemporary Scottish medical science. Behind a façade of didactic exercises, the Society gradually shifted from an elite debating club into an institution adopting new epistemological foundations for the acquisition of medical knowledge that included the design and execution of human and animal experiments.

Introduction

It is the inevitable tendency of the Scot mind to follow out every line to its terminus… In humble cottages as well as in University societies, the Scot is disputing in every spare moment of his time, from morning till night.

John Watson (1907)¹

On Saturday, 31 October 1778, a group of Edinburgh medical students belonging to the Royal Medical Society assembled for the season’s inaugural meeting. The forty-second session came to order under the direction of senior president Andrew Wardrop, who a few months earlier had signed a petition to King George III requesting a royal charter for this student-led organisation. Another academic year was about to begin at the University, and the atmosphere in the Medical Hall, which opened two years earlier, was festive and expectant. Among the scheduled speakers were two junior presidents, Edward Stevens and John Ford. Stevens was experimenting on the nature of gastric juice. Ford had joined the Society in December 1776 and planned to graduate the following year. Both were friends of another student, John Brown (1735–88), a former president of the Society who was becoming a vociferous critic of the medical theories held by William Cullen (1710–90), the doyen of Edinburgh academic medicine. Stevens’ presentation narrowly examined the behaviour of metals during the process
of calcination. Ford’s essay was about the search for the best method of studying medicine and its branches. Apologising for his inadequacies, including the necessary rhetorical skills, Ford vowed to discharge his duty by addressing the paper to men of his own rank who hoped to conduct themselves as gentlement and pursue their studies with determination. Custom and rules allowed for subsequent discussion of these papers with final copies handed to the session president. Bound in yearly folios, these dissertations constitute a unique collection of documents essential for a full understanding of Scottish medicine during its period of highest accomplishments.

**Background and organisation**

Several prominent medical students attending the University first established the Medical Society of Edinburgh in 1734. They included John Fothergill (1712–80), later a fashionable London practitioner, and George Cleghorn (1716–89), subsequently appointed professor of anatomy in Dublin. Formally constituted in 1737, the Society was the oldest Scottish medical organisation exclusively run by, and devoted to, medical students. The stated objective of this fraternity was ‘the improvement of medical knowledge’, considered essential to bolster the scientific and professional authority of practitioners. To implement the program, the fledgling physicians pledged to meet regularly and present their own learned papers and clinical cases obtained from the local Infirmary. The idea was to engage the entire membership in wide-ranging scholarship and promote freewheeling discussions. Like other social functions in Edinburgh, these youthful gatherings initially took place in the convivial atmosphere of a tavern. After holding regular meetings in a room placed at their disposal in the Edinburgh Infirmary, the students moved into their own building in 1776 and received a royal charter from George III on 14 December 1778.

A product of a new urban culture and morality, the Society became one of several voluntary organisations in eighteenth-century Edinburgh that, in an era of growing commercial complexity, played an important role in Scotland’s development. The organisation was a tangible expression of the Scottish Enlightenment, a new cultural movement responsible for gradually transforming Scotland from a backward, poor country into a prosperous British province. In Edinburgh, this ideology of self-improvement brought together leading aristocrats, clergymen, philosophers, literati, lawyers, and medical men, turning the abandoned seat of royalty into a cultural hub known as the ‘Athens of the North’. Other learned associations, among them the Philosophical Society and the Royal Physical Society, also shared Enlightenment values and interest in scientific matters. Their elite