

Texts and Documents

CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE AT WILLIAM SMELLIE'S LECTURES, 1757

THE certificate described in this note has been handed down through six generations of doctors in my family in almost direct line. It has been hidden away in the cupboard with the family skeletons, and is seeing the light of day now only because of its two hundredth anniversary. There is a note written on the back saying: 'This is of interest to the family only and should be handed down to the senior medical member of each generation.' I feel, however, that it may well prove to be of interest to others, especially those who have studied the history of medicine and the life of William Smellie in particular.

The James Nankivell to whom the certificate was issued was born on 29 August 1736 and died on 14 March 1822. He practised as a surgeon at Wadebridge in Cornwall. In Professor R. W. Johnstone's most interesting and comprehensive book, *William Smellie, the Master of British Midwifery* (1952) there are illustrations of the syllabus of Smellie's Course of Lectures upon Midwifery and of his 'Conditions', dated 1743, and setting out the fees for single and multiple courses. It has been estimated that he gave about 280 of these courses to a total of about 900 pupils, during his teaching years in London between 1741 and 1759. The College of Physicians of London did not institute its Licence in Midwifery until 1783. Only ten of these licences were granted, the first to Thomas Denman and William Osborn on 22 December 1783, and the last to Robert Batty on 30 September 1800. There is no doubt that the certificates of attendance at their lectures and courses issued by Smellie, William Hunter, Lowder, Orme and other celebrated teachers of midwifery were highly valued.

Smellie's courses consisted of:

- (1) Anatomical Lectures on the Pelvis and Uterus.
- (2) The Foetus in Utero and after Parturition.
- (3) Ante-Natal and Post-Natal Management of the Child-Bearing Woman.
- (4) Demonstrations on his Machines of Normal and Abnormal Labour.

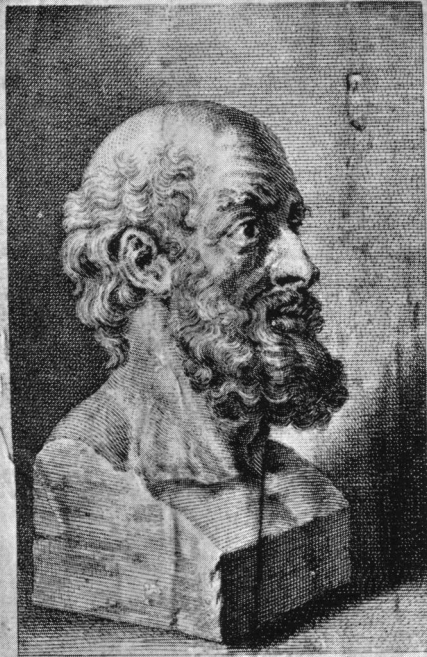
A single course was divided into twelve lectures and lasted two weeks. The fee was two guineas with an extra guinea for attendance at an actual labour.

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A much higher proportion of complicated labours prevailed in those days, owing to the prevalence of malformation of the pelvis from rickets, etc., and the lack of ante-natal supervision. Caesarian sections were not yet performed on the living mother, and obstructed labours often finished up with craniotomies with both patient and midwife prostrated with exhaustion. It is understandable, therefore, that Smellie encouraged pupils to take longer courses of one or even two years, when they paid twenty guineas, and were present at and even conducted several difficult cases.

I have not been able to find a duplicate of our family 'Certificate of Attendance', and it would be interesting to know if there are similar ones still in existence.

P. H. NANKIVELL



THESE are to certify, That *during*
the time of two Courses
M^r James Van Kivell Surgeon
hath carefully attended my LECTURES ON MID-
WIFERY, by which he has had the Opportunity
of being fully instructed in all the different Opera-
tions and Branches of that Art. Witness my Hand
this 13^{*th*} Day of *June 1757*
W^m Smellie M. D.
& Teacher of Midwifery in London.

Certificate of Attendance at
William Smellie's lectures on midwifery,
13 June 1757