

A Medical Student's Life, 1876-1877

Extracts from the Diary of Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker

K. Patrick Ober, MD

A medical history is the story of an individual patient.

Medical history, in contrast, is something quite different. It is the story of all of medicine in its grand entirety. This larger version of medical history incorporates the collective experiences of countless people in stories that played out over unimaginable stretches of time. It is a kaleidoscopic composite of shifting traditions, changing beliefs, and inconsistent behaviors. The history of medicine is history on the grandest of scales, virtually limitless in its scope.

Whether we notice it or not, medicine is always changing. Medical history on the large scale is constantly flowing past us. The history of medicine helps us understand who we are, how we got here, and why we do what we do. Medical history can show us where we have been; it can hint at where we may be going; it may even cause us to question the wisdom of the course we are taking. The history of medicine gives us an essential vantage point for understanding the workings of our profession and its impact on the lives of our patients.

The history of medicine is history of a daunting magnitude.

Where can we find it in portions we can assimilate?

There is one obvious starting place. We can learn from the experiences of the colleagues who preceded us. They have traveled the same road we are taking now. They have seen some of the trip we are just starting to make. Some began only a day before we did, while others completed their journey centuries before we came along. They have all seen things we have never encountered. Our predecessors all have something to teach us, if we will listen to them.

It is our duty to find the wisest of them, and to take pause, and to listen.

In recognition of the role of medical students in the creation of this inaugural issue of *Wake Forest Journal of Science &*

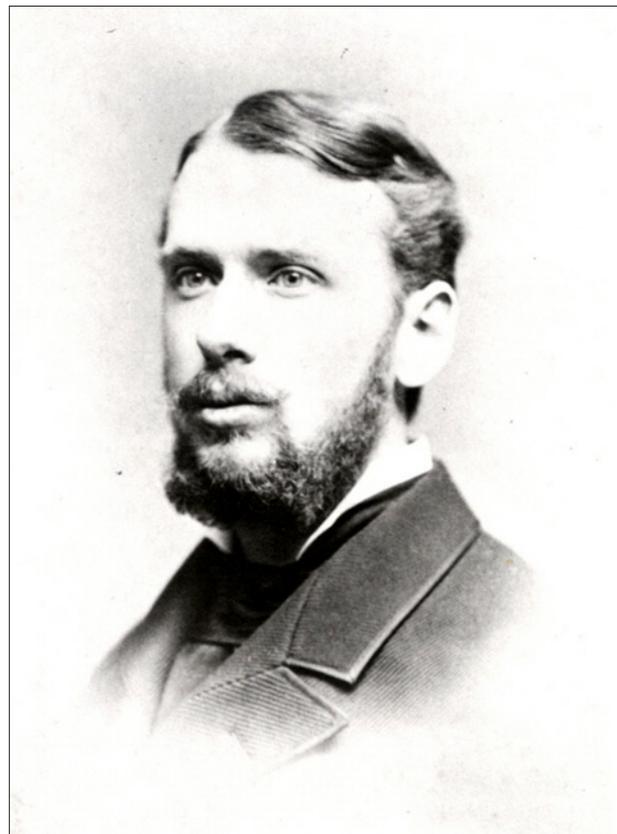


Photo: Edward Beecher Hooker, 1877
courtesy of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT

Medicine, could there be a better topic in medical history that a look at the life of a medical student?

I propose that Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker is an ideal candidate for such consideration. He has all of the necessary credentials. He was once a medical student himself (which is the most essential qualification for this exercise). He was a student long before our time (creating the necessary distance to minimize the distortion that comes from standing too close to an object under scrutiny). He became a superb physician and a national leader in medicine (making his

comments especially worthy of contemplation). The most important thing about Dr. Edward B. Hooker, though, is that we have access to his words and thoughts. They are not retrospective. He left behind a record of his medical school experiences as they took place, day by day.

The writings of Edward Hooker, medical student, contain no evidence that he expected his future to be notable in any fashion. On many days he simply strived for adequacy (he was, after all, a medical student). He didn't know what to expect of the years ahead. His medical school career was a blurring of bright spots and disheartening moments, as is the case for all medical students. He was plagued by the same insecurities that are familiar to anyone who ever attended medical school.

By way of background, I “met” Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker fairly recently, as a part of my longstanding interest in Mark Twain and the medical practices of his era.¹ After finding evidence that Dr. Hooker was involved in the medical care of Mark Twain's family, I traveled to the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut, to learn more about him. I read Dr. Hooker's personal letters in search of details to tell me about his association with Twain. My trip had an unforeseen bonus — I learned about the diaries Edward Hooker kept during his medical school days in 1876² and 1877.³

The content of Dr. Hooker's diaries has not been previously published. The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center has graciously given permission for the publication of selected extracts of Dr. Hooker's diary in this first edition of the *Wake Forest Journal of Science & Medicine*.

Before contemplating the significance of his diaries, though, let us review some background information on the young man named Edward Beecher Hooker.

Ned Hooker, a Fine Young Man

As a child, Edward (“Ned”) Beecher Hooker was as nice a boy as you would ever want to meet. By all accounts (most of which, admittedly, come from his mother, Isabella Beecher Hooker), he was loveable, smart, unselfish, and obedient. He was a bit on the shy side, which made him the target of occasional teasing by older boys. Intelligent and kind, a bit

introverted, always wanting to be helpful, Ned was the type of person who would be attracted to medical school, just as is the case today.

Ned Hooker grew up in the Nook Farm neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut, an enclave of some of the city's most accomplished citizens in literature, politics, and social progressiveness.

His interest in medicine started in 1867, according to his mother. As a 12-year-old boy, Ned Hooker delivered medication to Hattie Hawley, a Nook Farm neighbor. An interesting thought occurred to young Ned: his role as a delivery boy, though a modest one, had been an essential part of Mrs. Hawley's recovery! The feeling of worthiness brought a sense of fulfillment to the lad, and he deemed it a sensation worthy of experiencing again. Ned Hooker began to think that he would like to devote his life to helping others, and he decided to pursue a medical career.⁴

American medical education of the era was of inconsistent quality, and Americans who could afford to do so often sought training in Paris or Vienna as a supplement or alternative to the freestanding, for-profit medical schools that dominated the landscape of American medicine of the times. Ned began his study of medicine at the École de Médecine in Paris in 1874–1875. He returned to the United States and completed his medical education at Boston University College of Medicine in 1876–1877. His diaries encompass the experiences of his Boston years.

Ned Hooker's diaries suggest that some aspects of medical practice and medical education are elemental and essential, regardless of the era. It is hard to imagine that a medical student can become a competent physician without some knowledge of the cranial nerves, some exposure to [bio] chemistry, and some participation in surgery and obstetrics. It is not surprising, then, that Dr. Hooker's medical school experiences involved many activities that would be familiar to today's students, and might be considered integral and timeless components of the training of all medical students.

A Comparison of Experiences:

The Medical Student of Today and Ned Hooker in 1876-1877

Methodology: As I extracted the medical school experiences from the social and personal commentary in Ned Hooker’s diaries, I classified his medical school observations into categories that will be familiar to medical students of today (left column). The sequence of these activities follows the order of Ned Hooker’s own experiences as he recorded them in his diaries, and the details of the specific events are in Ned’s own words (right column).

Medical school activities of current medical students [ca. 2015]	Medical school activities of Ned Hooker [1876-1877]
1. Pass an exam.	Friday, February 3, 1876 “Examination in Ophthalmology this a.m. Did fairly I think.”
2. Study.	Wednesday, February 9, 1876 “Studied up on Chemistry today.”
3. Take a break from studying.	Wednesday, February 9, 1876 “Walked down town after lectures this p.m.”
4. Feel stupid.	Wednesday, February 9, 1876 “Have felt rather stupid all day.”
5. Study some more.	Thursday, February 10, 1876 “Studied hard on the cranial nerves this evening.”
6. Go to clinic.	Saturday, February 12, 1876 “Obstetrical clinic this morning.”
7. Have a slow day.	Tuesday February 22, 1876 “There was only one lecture at the Medical School today.”
8. Feel sleepy.	Tuesday February 22, 1876 “Felt sleepy and tired all day—”
9. Study some more.	Tuesday February 22, 1876 “Studied Physiology—”
10. Send a message to a friend.	Sunday, April 23, 1876 “Wrote Mattie a long letter—” [Mattie Kilbourne was Ned’s girlfriend.]
Home In Hartford	

On his breaks from medical school in Boston, Ned Hooker visited his family and friends in the Nook Farm neighborhood of Hartford.

Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) was one of the Hooker family’s neighbors at Nook Farm. Ned Hooker had a comfortable relationship with Sam Clemens, as shown by an entry in Ned’s medical school diary about a visit home in the spring of 1876.

Medical school activities of current medical students [ca. 2015]	Medical school activities of Ned Hooker [1876-1877]
11. Socialize with neighbors at home.	Sunday, April 23, 1876 “Called on Mark Twain — Took tea at Mr. Charles Perkin’s — spent the evening there.”
Back In Medical School In Boston	
12. Join a special interest group.	Thursday, April 27, 1876 “Went to a meeting of a Microscopy Society at Fraternity Hall tonight and saw some very fine specimens.”
13. Enjoy an uneventful day.	Tuesday, May 2, 1876 “Lovely day — nothing happened worth mentioning.”
14. Write a paper for publication.	Sunday, May 21, 1876 “Wrote an article for the Boston University Beacon”
15. Help a classmate prepare.	Monday, May 22, 1876 “Helped Otto Sasse with his essay for the surgical class this evening.”
16. Participate in surgery.	Monday, May 26, 1876 “Helped at an operation by Dr. Fred Payne for the removal of an eye.”
Home In Hartford	
17. Get party supplies together.	Thursday, September 28, 1876 “This morning Lilly Warner, Mattie and I went after autumn leaves and wild things generally for decorating Mark Twain’s house, who is to have a party tomorrow night.”
18. Decorate for a party.	Friday, September 29, 1876 “We all have at Nook Farm spent the greater portion of the day decorating Mr. Clemens’s house and it did look finely.”
19. Go to a party?	

Considering that he spent two days in helping with the decorating, it seems likely Ned also attended the party. The gathering at the Clemens home appeared to have been a long-anticipated neighborhood event. Neighbor Lilly Warner, who had helped Ned and his girlfriend Mattie gather the decorations for the party, was pleased with how the “masses of wild things” they collected had turned the house into a “dream of delight.” The invitation from Sam and Livy Clemens to Ned’s sister Alice

Day and her husband John C. Day, written on September 27, is the only extant invitation [“Mr & Mrs Clemens will be happy to see Mr. & Mrs. Day on Friday evening from 7 till 11”].

The weekend activities did not end with the party at the Clemens’s house on Friday. The next day, Ned had tea with his aunt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was Clemens’s next-door neighbor and best known as the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. (When Abraham Lincoln met her, he allegedly described Stowe as “the little woman who wrote the book that made this Great War.”)

After the tea, Ned attended a political rally promoting the presidential candidacy of Rutherford B. Hayes.

Medical school activities of current medical students [ca. 2015]	Medical school activities of Ned Hooker [1876-1877]
20. Drink tea with an older relative.	Saturday, September 30, 1876 <i>“This evening we took tea at Mrs. Stowe’s and then went to a big Republican rally at Allyn Hall — Mark Twain presided & Gen. Hawley spoke.”</i>
21. Attend a civic event.	
Ned returned to medical school in Boston, but came home a month later to register to vote in Hartford in the 1876 election.	
22. Register to vote.	Friday, October 27, 1876 <i>“The Republican town committee of Hartford have agreed to pay half my expenses if I would be registered and vote in Hartford. Therefore, I went to Hartford at 3 o’clock this afternoon.”</i>
Back In School In Boston	
24. Have a lecturer not show up.	Thursday, January 4, 1877 <i>“Prof. Manse failed to come this afternoon.”</i>
25. Go to another clinic.	Saturday, January 6, 1877 <i>“Clinic this morning.”</i>
26. Do frivolous things.	Saturday, January 6, 1877 <i>“Howe & I spent the evening after nine o’clock at Mr. Burrell’s — music, and whist.”</i>
27. Be too sleepy to study, and do frivolous things instead.	Saturday, January 13, 1877 <i>“I was too sleepy to study this evening & instead played whist at Mr. Burrell’s.”</i>
28. Study for a while, and then do frivolous things.	Wednesday, January 17, 1877 <i>“After studying till 10 P.M., Howe and I went to Crawford and Burrell’s room and played Sancho-Pedro until after midnight.”</i>
29. Socialize with friends.	Friday, January 19, 1877 <i>“This evening 25 of us from the Medical School went to the Boston Museum and saw “Evangeline.” It was well acted and very funny —”</i>

Medical school activities of current medical students [ca. 2015]	Medical school activities of Ned Hooker [1876-1877]
30. Ask for letters of recommendation.	Friday, January 19, 1877 <i>“Wrote to Rev. Ed. E. Hale, (39 Highland St.) Judge Putnam, and Mark Twain asking for certificate of moral character to present for graduation at the Medical School.”</i>
31. Receive a letter of recommendation.	Monday, January 22, 1877 <i>“Received “Mark Twains” certificate of moral character this morning.”</i>
32. Pay fees and tuition.	Wednesday, January 31, 1877 <i>“I handed in my thesis and other documents to the Dean this morning and paid \$30 for the graduation fees.”</i>
33. Panic about upcoming exams.	Thursday, February 8, 1877 <i>“Examinations are coming thick and fast next week and I began to tremble inwardly.”</i>
34. Discover that the panic had been well-founded.	Friday, February 16, 1877 <i>“The examination in Pathological Anatomy took place this morning. I did not do well in it.”</i>
35. Graduate.	

Synopsis:

Comparison of the Medical School Experience of 1876-1877 with the Medical School Experiences of Today, Based on Ned Hooker’s Medical School Diary

Medical school, then and now, would appear to involve an immense amount of studying, taking exams that go well, taking exams that don’t go well at all, participating in clinics, having surgical experiences, enjoying quiet times, having days of feeling stupid, being too tired to study, obtaining recommendation letters, paying tuition and fees, planning parties, surviving through the support of friends, visiting home during breaks, and periodically escaping from the brain-numbing requirement of unending study by playing games and listening to music.

In other words, medical school has not changed much between 1876 and now.

That seems strangely reassuring.

Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker: The Rest of the Story

After graduating from medical school in 1877, Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker pursued postgraduate training in New York in 1877-1878. He returned home to Hartford to start medical practice in 1878.

Hooker became a respected homeopathic physician. Like many homeopathic doctors of the era, he was not a strict advocate of homeopathy, but had an eclectic approach to medical care that adopted a variety of promising methods as they came along.

He was part of a new wave of medical practitioners who were interested in promoting sanitation and preventive medicine. Hooker did indeed provide health care for his Nook Farm neighbor, Sam Clemens. His relationship with Clemens matured with time, as is often the case for a novice physician. He was no longer just a nice neighborhood boy who hoped to do some good in the world someday. He was no longer the medical student from Boston who came home

on a weekend to decorate the Clemens's house for an autumn party; he was no longer the medical student who needed a letter of recommendation in order to graduate. He underwent an instantaneous metamorphosis into a full-fledged physician and respected healthcare authority at the precise moment he was granted his medical degree. (This perplexing escalation in credibility that is created by the reception of a piece of paper has always been a phenomenon that is disorienting to rational medical school graduates.)

When the scare of an epidemic of “membranous croup” (diphtheria) struck the Clemens family in 1881, Dr. Edward Hooker supervised revisions in the household plumbing, in keeping with the recommendations of medical experts of the era for curbing such diseases. After the Clemens's youngest daughter contracted scarlet fever in 1882, the house was fumigated with sulfuric acid (another state-of-the-art medical recommendation of the time) under the direction of Dr. Hooker.⁶ The fumigation by the caustic acid ruined three or four hundred dollars of metalwork within the house. The only saving grace for Sam Clemens, relatively speaking, was that the cost of the damage from acid was less expensive than the fifteen hundred dollar price of the plumbing revisions of the previous year.⁷

Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker contributed to the progress of the medical profession throughout his career. He presented a paper on the treatment of tuberculosis at the 1899 meeting of the American Institute of Homeopathy.⁸ He continued to promote the importance of preventive medicine throughout his career.⁹ He advocated sex education for children.¹⁰ He researched treatments for deafness. He was elected president of the American Institute of Homoeopathy in 1907.

On March 17, 1894, Dr. Hooker summarized the accomplishments of his career in a letter to his sister Alice Day.

“I have prospered in my professional life...and we are very happy, which is the main thing in life next to being honorable.”¹¹

After a challenging medical school career, and experiencing some awkwardness in finding his niche as a young physician, Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker had achieved professional success. He had maintained his integrity. He had found happiness in his life.

Ned Hooker had arrived at a good spot.

Conclusion

There is hope.

Authors

Author Affiliations: ¹Section on Endocrinology & Metabolism, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC 27157

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Address correspondence to:

K. Patrick Ober, M.D.
 Department of Internal Medicine
 Wake Forest School of Medicine
 Winston-Salem, NC 27157
 Phone: 336-713-7251
 Email: kpober@wakehealth.edu

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