White Coat Ceremony Marks P&S 250th Anniversary on Aug. 14

July 31, 2017

Posted in: Medical Education / Medicine

A copy of this letter from 1767—a petition to King’s College Board of Governors to open a medical school—is on display in the exhibit “P&S 1767-2017: 250 Years of the College of Physicians and Surgeons” through Dec. 20 in the Hammer Health Sciences Center, Lower Level 2. Other items in the exhibit are a photo of some of the first female students admitted in 1917 and student notes of lectures given by founder Samuel Bard in 1774.

When Columbia’s newest medical students receive their white coats on Aug. 14, they will do so on a day with historical meaning for Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons (P&S). On the same date 250 years ago—Aug. 14, 1767, to be exact—the governors of King’s College unanimously approved a petition to organize a “School of Physick” at the college. Their action marked the start of medical education at Columbia.

The petition was submitted on Aug. 4, 1767, by five New York physicians, who wrote candidly about the state of the medical profession in the 18th century as one that “has till of late years, in this Country, been considered … rather humiliating than reputable” and noted their hope that a medical school “will be no inconsiderable advantage” to King’s College.
Back then, access to medical education was scarce for aspiring physicians. Only one medical school existed in the 13 American Colonies and it had opened just two years earlier in Philadelphia. If Americans wanted to study medicine, they had to apprentice with a practitioner for many years or travel to Europe for a long, pricey university education. Much of what we know today as “modern medicine” was still decades away, including the invention of the stethoscope and use of anesthesia during procedures.

The petitioners—Samuel Clossy, Peter Middleton, John Jones, James Smith, and Samuel Bard—saw the need to expand and professionalize medical education. They were some of the most prominent physicians of their time. Dr. Bard was an American who earned his MD in Europe and later became George Washington’s physician; Drs. Clossy and Middleton trained in Ireland and Scotland, respectively, and are known for their contributions to anatomy; Dr. Jones wrote the first textbook of surgery by an American to be published in the United States; and Dr. Smith was an expert in chemistry. The five physicians would become the medical school’s first faculty members, along with a sixth, John V.B. Tennent, a renowned obstetrician, who had written the Board a separate letter of support. The Board’s approval of the petition elected all six men as professors.

Classes began on Nov. 2, 1767, at the King’s College “Faculty of Physick,” the first medical school in New York. King’s College granted its first baccalaureates in medicine in 1769 and the first MD in North America in 1770. This history will be the backdrop for the upcoming White Coat Ceremony in The Armory, marking the start of medical school for 152 members of the Class of 2021.
The ceremony was founded at P&S in 1993 by Arnold P. Gold, MD, professor of clinical neurology and clinical pediatrics, to reinforce a strong commitment to humanistic practice in medical students. He is also the founder of the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, which has been instrumental in developing, through curriculae, research, conferences, ceremonies and awards, more than 20 diverse programs that support the education and training of humanistic providers. Dr. Gold is among the guest speakers who will address students at this year’s ceremony, as is Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel, MD, University Professor at Columbia University; Kavli Professor and Director, Kavli Institute for Brain Science; Co-Director, Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute; and an Investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

For more information about the 250th anniversary of P&S, visit 250.ps.columbia.edu.

Pictured is a copy of the full petition to King’s College Board of Governors to open a medical school in 1767.