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What's Past is Prologue: The Pharmaceutical Syllabus of 1910

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“What’s past is prologue” is a quote from William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, Act 2, Scene I. In the play, this phrase signified that all that had happened before that time (the past), led the play’s characters (Antonio and Sebastian) to the opportunity to do what they were about to do next. Some interpret this to mean that everything up to this point has “set the stage” for the play’s characters to determine their own destinies. Thus, the past does not dictate future acts, but rather it serves as a prologue and prepares the participants for what happens next.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, “Without tradition, *pharmacy practice* is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. But without innovation, it is a corpse.” Prologue and tradition have been important for shaping pharmacy practice and how it sets the stage for practice innovation. Thus, we propose that it is important for our discipline to understand our past and to bring this history into our discussions of future innovation for several reasons such as:

- our past helps us understand individuals and populations
- our past helps us understand change
- our past contributes to moral and ethical understanding
- our past provides identity
- our past defines culture and expected norms
- studying history is essential for professionalism and good citizenship

We propose that the pharmacy profession is at risk for losing key historical documents since many of these precious documents may be contained in personal collections and libraries, or institutional holdings that may not be catalogued. One way to preserve key documents for our profession is to publish them digitally in an open-access journal such as INNOVATIONS in pharmacy. Each volume of this journal will be deposited into the Digital Conservancy (the digital storage mechanism we are using for this journal) so that what is published in the journal will be accessible into perpetuity.

As an example, we are highlighting “The Pharmaceutical Syllabus, 1910” as digitized by Google Books, originally obtained from the Library of the University of Michigan.

[The Pharmaceutical Syllabus, 1910](#)

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Written just over 100 years ago, the Pharmaceutical Syllabus outlined a “minimum course of study and a syllabus for the guidance of pharmacy schools in their preparation of students for admission to the boards’ licensing examinations” (p. 7). The descriptions of the processes used, challenges faced, and innovations attained still resonate with our profession 100 years later.

For example, pharmacy historian Robert Buerki pointed out that the Syllabus came about as a result of the passage of so-called “prerequisite legislation” that required graduation from a school or college of pharmacy as a condition for licensure examination.¹ Furthermore, the Syllabus was the product of collaboration among various organizations and had the goals of creating uniformity in board examinations, endorsement of licenses (reciprocity), and new norms for pharmacy practice. By 1913, 62 of the 83 schools and colleges of pharmacy in the United States had formally adopted the Syllabus, and “only the impossibility of obtaining copies of the first edition” prevented such action by several other schools.¹

We suggest that a perusal of the Pharmaceutical Syllabus of 1910 serves as useful prologue for the innovations we are attempting to create during the current age of pharmacy practice. We still wrestle with new legislation, collaboration among organizations, creation of uniformity, gaining endorsements, and establishing new norms of practice. It is also instructive to consider how things that we take for granted today, had their genesis years ago as an innovative, sometimes radical notion.

We encourage readers of this commentary to consider submitting key historical documents for preservation through digital means. A short commentary accompanying your submission regarding its importance and value would be greatly appreciated.

One may ask, “Why publish these in a journal titled INNOVATIONS in pharmacy? As mentioned before, we would argue that prologue and tradition are important for understanding how pharmacy practice has been shaped up to now and how it sets the stage for practice innovation. Furthermore, we would like to borrow a quote from Coco Chanel (French fashion designer who ruled over Parisian haute couture for almost six decades, 1883 – 1971) who said, “Innovation! One cannot be forever innovating. I want to create classics.”

Reference

1. Buerki, RA, In Search of Excellence, The First Century of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 1999, Vol. 63, Fall Supplement, 21-25.