

Ian Taylor

As one of the newest members of the group of Deans, I may bring a different perspective on the distinctive character of Downstate as an academic institution. Born, raised, and trained in the UK, I came to the US in 1976 because it offered me opportunities not available at home. Having served on the faculty of a full range of academic medical centers across the country – some public, some private, I can attest that Downstate is different from anywhere else that I have been or seen.

Downstate's uniqueness – and I speak here not just of the College of Medicine, but of all the schools and University Hospital of Brooklyn – derives, I think, from its deep and longstanding roots in Brooklyn – an urban community that has been the arrival point for successive waves of immigration for hundreds of years, beginning with the Dutch colonists who farmed the land that Downstate stands on now.

For all new Americans, Brooklyn has provided a place to get a start – offering housing and employment and access to excellent education for anyone who has the drive and ability to succeed.

All this is true today – but it was also true in 1860.

Back in those days, Brooklyn was an independent city, with a population of 250,000. It was at that time America's third largest city, and roughly half its population was foreign born.

There were 120 legally qualified physicians practicing in the City of Brooklyn, and 2 hospitals: The Long Island College Hospital, founded in 1858, and the Brooklyn City Hospital. A third hospital, Kings County, was located outside the limits of the City of Brooklyn, in the Village of Flatbush -- a point so distant it was difficult to get to.

The individuals who founded our predecessor institution wanted to create a progressive medical school patterned after the European style of medical education, which united medical schools with a hospital.

The theory was that the hospital would benefit because it could attract doctors of superior ability; the medical school would benefit because it could offer students unobstructed access to the patients in the hospital wards.

And so, the Long Island College Hospital-Collegiate Division was born. It was the FIRST medical school in the country to bring medical teaching to the patient's bedside.

The 8 original founders were among the most advanced thinkers and distinguished practitioners of their time.

I won't dwell on who they were – you can read about them in the history panels out in the Atrium – but I do want to mention Austin Flint, the most eminent member, and a New Orleans transplant, like me, so you know I feel a bond.

In addition to his extensive medical writings and his contributions to medical diagnosis, including a heart murmur named after him, Flint did more than anyone else in this country to bring the stethoscope into general use in America.

And he delivered the first graduation address to the Class of 1860.

It was a long address, and it covered many issues. For example, the need for more space for teaching, and for better anatomy labs. Sound familiar?

He gave good advice on the dos and don'ts of developing a medical practice. For example: don't drink with your patients – especially at the same time you are treating them; and don't tie your horse in front of mansions simply to impress passerby's with the quality of your clientele.

But he also counseled the 21 graduates to be of service to the poor, to work hard and to love their work, and perhaps most important, to strive for the highest levels of professionalism.

“Medicine” he said, “will continue to advance, and the only question for you is, shall we be left behind in its onward march, or shall we advance with it?”

I think over the last 150 years, we have risen to Austin Flint's challenge.

We have advanced the practice of medicine. We offer opportunities for education and careers that no other institution of higher learning in the borough can offer. Our students have a strong commitment to service and an equally strong commitment to the future of their professions.

We are the focal point of a healthcare system that serves one of the most diverse populations in the country.

And we are known nationally and internationally for the excellence of our clinical training.

I think if Austin Flint were here to celebrate with us today, he would most certainly say, “Job well done.”