



Mark Witten

# The History of Dental Education in Ontario

Ontario's first successful dental school, the Royal College of Dental Surgeons (RCDS), was launched in Toronto in 1875, following the debacle of two earlier failed attempts. Fortunately, the founders of the new school had learned some valuable lessons from the costly mistakes of their predecessors.

In the fall of 1868, the Canada College of Dentistry was hastily formed due to a squabble among members of the Board of Directors of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario (RCDSO), the dental licensing body. The Board, which had the authority to establish and run a dental college under the Act Respecting Dentistry, formed a five-person committee to consider opening a school. Three committee members — Dr. Barnabas Day (the ODA and RCDSO founding President), Dr. Curtis Strong Chittenden and Dr. John O'Donnell — argued this was premature and wanted to wait three to five years. But Dr. George Elliott and Dr. J. Stuart Scott were raring to go.

Although outvoted, the determined duo announced in the Toronto *Globe* the opening of the Canada College of Dentistry. Dr. Day responded in a letter to the *Globe* that this action was “simply absurd” and the Board would offer no financial help. But with seven students enrolled, a tuition fee of \$50 per student and Dr. Elliott as Dean, the new college opened and ran its first session from December 1, 1868, to March 1, 1869.

The Board then tried, but failed, to persuade the renegades to open a Board-sanctioned school and amalgamate it with the Canada College of Dentistry. So, in July of 1869, the Board opened the Royal College of Dental Surgeons at Church and Court Streets, in Toronto. The tuition was \$100, double that of its rival college, and the Board agreed to provide up to \$300 to support the school. Only two students enrolled in the first term, and by 1870, at the end of the first session, the RCDS had a deficit of \$125. The Board had to close the school and sell the furniture and equipment to pay off the debt. The Canada College of Dentistry also failed.

Before the two schools were formed, Canadian dentists had to attend dental colleges in the United States, including the famous Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, founded in 1840. One Canadian dentist who trained there was Dr. Henry Tunstall Wood, a founding member and President of the Ontario Dental Association. Dr. Chittenden, another ODA founder and President, had studied at the New York College of Dentistry.

In 1875, the Ontario Dental Society urged a reluctant Board to try again to start a school. This time the Board wisely chose its secretary: Dr. James Branston Willmott, an individual with the ability, qualifications, character and desire to form and run a dental school. In 1870, Dr. Willmott had enrolled at the Philadelphia Dental College, graduating at the head of his class, and while practising dentistry he'd given lectures to indentured students preparing to write their licensing exams.

The Board supplied \$150 for rent and \$250 for furnishings, but assumed no financial liability for the school. Tuition fees of \$100 per student were to fund all other costs. Dr. Willmott and Dr. Luke Teskey were appointed as lecturers, without pay. If the school made money, they had the Board's permission to use the residual funds for salaries.

On November 3, 1875, the Royal College of Dental Surgeons (RCDS) opened in two rooms above a cabinet shop at 46 Church Street, in Toronto. Eleven students registered for the first four-month session. Dr. Willmott taught operative and mechanical dentistry, dental pathology, chemistry and pharmacology, while also operating a dental practice and the college. Dr. Teskey taught physiology, dental history and dental surgery, while also practising dentistry and studying medicine. They were assisted by five other part-time clinical instructors in the infirmary.

After the first session, Dr. Willmott reported that the 11 students had successfully completed their courses and the infirmary had performed 259 extractions, 136 restorations and various other treatments for 120 patients free

of charge. At his request, the Board increased the annual grant by \$50 to provide additional space. As the number of students increased, the staff expanded and the school moved to larger premises, first at Richmond and Victoria Streets, and then at 13 Louisa Street.

In 1888, Dr. Willmott achieved another coup when the RCDS became affiliated with the University of Toronto, which agreed to confer the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery upon students completing the prescribed course of study. The first exam was held in 1889, and 25 successful candidates received the first doctoral degrees conferred on dental graduates outside the U.S. Dr. Willmott, who remained as Dean until his death in 1915, is regarded as the father of dental education in Ontario.

A second dental school in the province opened at the University of Western Ontario in London, in 1966. In other provinces, dental schools were established at McGill University and Université de Montréal in 1905, Dalhousie University in 1908, and University of Alberta in 1923. These were followed by dental schools at University of Manitoba in 1958, University of British Columbia in 1964, University of Saskatchewan in 1968 and Université Laval in 1971.

In 1919, applications to the RCDS skyrocketed and the Board asked the Ontario government for a \$100,000 grant to help build an addition to the school, located then at 240 College Street. The government initially refused, but after hundreds of discharged soldiers milled about the campus demanding admission, the funds were granted. More than 1,000 students were registered at the school in 1919, the largest dental school contingent in Canadian history. The 320 students who enrolled in first year in 1919 became the graduating class of 1923 (the famous “Whiz-Bang” class, named after the sound of the shell fired from the German 77 millimetre gun of World War I), which is said to have produced more dental leaders than any other class.

In 1923, the Ontario government recommended the RCDS merge with the University of Toronto, declaring it could not continue to support an independent school. After much discussion, the Board gifted the school to the University of Toronto. In 1925, the school Dr. Willmott had started above a cabinet shop 50 years earlier became the University of Toronto Faculty of Dentistry, and in 1959 it moved to its current location at 124 Edward Street. 📍

## SOURCES

Most of the historical information was obtained from the following sources:

1. Shosenberg, JW. *The Rise of the Ontario Dental Association: 125 Years of Organized Dentistry*. (1992). Toronto: Ontario Dental Association.
2. Gullett, DW. *A History of Dentistry in Canada*. (1971). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
3. University of Toronto. 2011. *Dentistry Library Blog*. Available from: <http://uoftdentistrylibrary.blogspot.ca/2011/04/brief-history-of-dental-profession-in.html>
4. University of Toronto, Faculty of Dentistry. *History*. Available from: <https://www.dentistry.utoronto.ca/about/history>.
5. Historica Canada. *Dentistry*. Available from: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/dentistry/>

---

*Mark Witten is an award-winning writer and editor whose articles have appeared in many university alumni magazines, including U of T Dentistry Magazine and UBC Dentistry Impressions magazine, and consumer magazines, such as Toronto Life and Canadian Living. He is also the Editor of the forthcoming book, The Rise of the Ontario Dental Association: 150 Years of Organized Dentistry, by Dr. James W. Shosenberg.*