Once upon a time...a title story

Roger King Cambridge GDP and Ex-Wellcome Research Associate in the History of Medicine at Cambridge University, sheds some light on the Dr title debate

There seems to be some confusion in the profession regarding the story of how the use of the title ‘doctor’ by the medical profession came about, and around the historical reasons for and against its use by dentists. I’d like to try to make the historical context of this now-contentious title a little clearer.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, three distinct types of practitioner offered ‘orthodox’ (whatever that may mean - the subject of a different debate) cures: the physician, the apothecary and the surgeon. For the purposes of this title debate, it is the physician and the surgeon that concern us.

The physician’s services were generally offered to those with the means to pay well. He had attended a school of medicine, which in England meant Oxford or Cambridge until relatively recently. In order to gain entry to this medical school, he (and, for this period, it was only ‘he’) first needed to hold a higher degree, the granting of which would require him to defend an original thesis. This degree had been in existence for many centuries as the doctorate, a word taken from the Latin docere, to teach. Thus, the physician was a doctor before he even entered medical school. As a theoretical man, working on an intellectual level, actual physical contact with the patient was rarely required.

The surgeon’s services were employed by a wider population. The surgeon was a practical man - he had served a long apprenticeship, usually seven years, to a master and performed a masterpiece (with no written examination) to gain his right to join the Barber-Surgeons Company. This was a guild, which took its place alongside other liveried companies, such as those of the Goldsmiths, Coopers and Drapers. On 2 May 1745, royal assent was granted to the formation of the new, independent Company of Surgeons.

Physicians, then, took the title of doctor because they already held a doctorate. Surgeons, on the other hand, held no degree and retained the title of ‘Mr’. It can still be noted that medical surgeons revert to the ‘company’ title with some degree of pride, setting them apart from their physician colleagues.

Dentistry’s origins lie within surgery. Around the start of the eighteenth century, a small number of French surgeons, centered around Paris and epitomised by Pierre Fauchard, began to specialise: teeth, eyes and childbirth were prominent areas of surgical practice to which they turned their attentions.

Physicians, or ‘doctors’, have retained their original title out of courtesy. Dentists never held this title historically - the university-conferred dental degree post-dates that time when ‘doctors’ ceased to hold bona-fide doctorates by some margin.

So the debate will continue. Me? I hold a doctorate - in history - but my patients still call me ‘Mr’.