

The Rockefeller Foundation and its attempts to develop medical education in 1922

J. Wallace.

Department of Continuing Education, Rewley House, Wellington Square, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom.

Abstract

The Rockefeller Foundation is an American philanthropic organization that wished to scientize medical education globally, based on an interaction between hospital, university, and research. To achieve this end, Wickliffe Rose, an officer of the Foundation, visited Ireland in April 1922. The aim of this study was to enhance understanding of efforts by the Rockefeller Foundation to develop medical education and practice in 1922.

Employing a social-history methodology, the primary sources utilised included material from the archives of the National Library of Medicine, Washington, the Rockefeller Foundation, New York, the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, and the National Archives of Ireland. Contemporary journals and newspapers were also accessed.

Wickliffe Rose found very unsettled conditions in the newly emerging Irish state. He noted that a public health perspective was underdeveloped and there was a formidable gap between the scientific education provided in the medical schools and the practical training available in the associated hospitals. A stable government was urgently needed and, subsequently, the development of a strong health service on a county basis.

During 1922, the Foundation encountered numerous political, cultural, and social challenges in Ireland, including a highly unstable political situation. Wickliffe Rose came to recognise that formidable problems in health and education existed across national boundaries. During that year, the Rockefeller Foundation began to explore the possibility of funding the health organisation of the League of Nations. The Foundation wished to supplement the Foundation's efforts to develop medical education and practice internationally and also in newly emerging states.

Introduction

The Foundation had a specific vision of a global, reformed, scientific medicine. The overarching aim of the Foundation was the training of a group of scientific medical practitioners, based on an interaction between hospital, university, and research.¹ University

professors and laboratory scientists were to enter the hospital setting bringing with them a new scientific ethos that linked teaching and research.

Methods and aims

Previous scholarship has suggested that the effect of independence and partition on medical education in Ireland was under-researched.² The aim of this study was to enhance understanding of attempts by the Rockefeller Foundation to develop medical education and practice in 1922. Employing a social-history methodology, the primary sources utilised included material accessed through the archives of the National Library of Medicine, Washington, the Rockefeller Foundation, New York, the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, and the National Archives of Ireland. Contemporary journals and newspapers were also employed.

Findings

The overarching aim of the Rockefeller Foundation, established in 1913, was the promotion of the well-being of mankind.³ The Foundation looked to science for fundamental solutions to the problems of poverty and disease. With its independence and resources, the Foundation could fund long-term, structural improvement of very different education systems. Wickliffe Rose was responsible for initiating the Rockefeller Foundation's first contact with Ireland.⁴ Rose visited Dublin on 20 April 1922 and stayed at the Shelbourne Hotel which was then 'under military guard'.⁵ The Four Courts had been occupied four days earlier by two-hundred anti-Treaty forces.

In Dublin, Rose discovered that the health service was under the local government board. He also learned that there were eight-hundred local medical officers, receiving about £300 per year. These were 'primarily physicians for the poor'.⁶ These doctors did not have the diploma in public health, were not paid to do public health work, and 'did not do' so. There were no county medical officers of health. Rose was told by Professor Edward Bigger that Trinity, University College Dublin, and the College of Surgeons offered a diploma in public health. However, the diploma was taught by men who did not have 'the public health point of view'. Dr Bigger wanted an Institute of Hygiene in Dublin staffed by doctors with a public health perspective. It would be independent of the two universities so as 'to draw students from both'. Rose also noted that the medical school of University College Dublin did not control its hospitals, the Mater and St Vincent's, and that Trinity's pathological and bacteriological laboratories lacked facilities and funds.

On 22 April, Rose visited the Royal College of Surgeons. He noted that it was 'independent of church and state'. He commented on its 'fine spirit' with 'many eminent men among its graduates'. Rose later had 'luncheon at the Vice-Regal lodge' with Count Fitz Allan, who had

an interest in public health.⁷ The Lord Lieutenant believed that the government was in its formative stage and that this was the 'right time to bring in proposals'. Rose was informed of the 'large degree of local autonomy' of the constituent colleges of the national university, based in Dublin, Cork, and Galway. Rose later had dinner at the 'Yacht Club in Kingston' organised by Dr Bigger.

Arthur Griffith had been elected President of the Third Dail in January 1922.⁸ Rose met with Griffith and William Cosgrave and found them to be mainly preoccupied with establishing public order.⁹ Rose was told of significant financial and social problems in Ireland, such as the extensive overcrowding, with entire families living in single rooms in decayed tenements. Griffith and Cosgrave believed that public health would 'be part of the government programme' as Ireland had not kept pace with public health developments elsewhere. The government should be 'able and willing to provide a public health service' and also £50,000 for research.

Rose also met with Dr Adrian Stokes, Sir William Smylie, and Dr Bigger, who informed him that the co-operation of the Foundation in developing medical education and practice would be 'heartily welcome'. Rose later had dinner in Trinity with the Provost and senior fellows, 'an extremely agreeable evening'. Rose was informed that having three medical schools in a small city like Dublin was 'a calamity' with 'no hope of combination'. There were a dozen hospitals in the capital in 1922, each with about 100 beds. Teaching took place in all hospitals but 'without specialisation of wards or grouping of clinical material'. The hospitals appointed the clinical staff, not the universities. Only Trinity had a voice in clinical appointments. Science education occurred in the medical schools and clinical training in the hospitals, with a lack of co-ordination between the two. Rose was also told of the very limited public health service in Ireland and that there were practically no public health laboratory facilities. Rose recommended that full-time public health doctors should be appointed in each county. The Foundation would help Dr Bigger set up both a public health laboratory and also fund a centre to train staff for that laboratory.¹⁰ Rose returned to London on 23 April.

Wickliffe Rose was a philosopher and an educationalist. During 1922, he began to develop a relationship with the newly founded League of Nations set up in 1920 by the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War. Rose saw the League as a possible means of advancing the Foundation's strategy of improving healthcare globally. Rose played a key role during 1922 in advancing the special relationship between the Rockefeller Foundation and the League's Health Organisation by backing an exchange of public health personnel and also intelligence on epidemics.¹¹

The League of Nations was the first world-wide intergovernmental organisation whose principal mission was to maintain world peace and promote health. The Rockefeller Foundation played an important role in the transition from the League of Nations to the United Nations. Without the personal enthusiasm of Rose, the stabilisation of the League of Nations Health Organisation would not have occurred and the legacy of the League would not have been carried into the United Nations and later, into the World Health Organisation.

The Rockefeller Foundation faced numerous obstacles in Ireland, including highly unsettled political conditions in the recently partitioned island. There was a lack of administrative experience among politicians, with self-government seen as an end in itself and not an opportunity to improve medical education. There existed a disconnect between the scientific education offered in medical schools and the practical training available in the associated hospitals. Previously, in attempting to improve medical education and practice in Brazil, the Foundation had found that there were simply 'too many holes and too few shovels'. During 1922, Wickliffe Rose and the Rockefeller Foundation came to appreciate that health problems crossed national boundaries. The interventions of an international organisation like the League of Nations might be better placed to overcome the extensive political, cultural, and denominational barriers encountered internationally and also in newly emerging states.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

Corresponding author:

John Wallace,
Department of Continuing Education,
Rewley House,
Wellington Square,
University of Oxford,
Oxford,
United Kingdom.

E-Mail: john.wallace@wadh.oxon.org

References:

1. Westmore A, Penington D. Courting the Rockefeller Foundation and other attempts to integrate clinical teaching, medical practice, and research in Melbourne. *Health Hist* 2009;11(2):62-91, 62.

2. Jones G. The Rockefeller Foundation and medical education in Ireland in the 1920s. *Ir. Hist. Stud* 1997;30(120):564–80, 568.
3. The Rockefeller Foundation. *N Engl J of Med* 1923;188:1014.
4. Bevier G, Gunn S. 8 Sept 1924. Public Health in Ireland, p. 2. FA386b, Subseries 403.K, Box: 3. Letter no. 474, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, New York.
5. Rose W. 1922. Log of journey to Europe, p. 78. Rockefeller Foundation Diaries, Officers Diaries, RG 12, M-R, Wickliffe Rose Diary, 1922, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, New York.
6. Rose W. 1922. Log of journey to Europe, p. 79. Rockefeller Foundation Diaries, Officers Diaries, RG 12, M-R, Wickliffe Rose Diary, 1922, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, New York.
7. Rose W. April 1922. Report of visit to Ireland. FA386b, Subseries 403.K, Box, 3. Rockefeller Foundation Archive, New York.
8. McGee O. Arthur Griffith. In O’Keeffe H, Crowley J, O’Drisceoil D, Borgonovo J, Murphy M, editors. *Atlas of the Irish civil war*. Cork: Cork University Press; 2024. pp. 29-31, p. 29.
9. Rose W. 1922. Log of journey to Europe, p. 81. Rockefeller Foundation Diaries, Officers Diaries, RG 12, M-R, Wickliffe Rose Diary, 1922, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, New York.
10. Rose W. 1922. Log of journey to Europe, p. 86. Rockefeller Foundation Diaries, Officers Diaries, RG 12, M-R, Wickliffe Rose Diary, 1922, Rockefeller Foundation Archive, New York.
11. Weindling P. Philanthropy and world health, the Rockefeller Foundation and the League of Nations Health Organisation. *Minerva* 1997;35:269-281, 274.