

## Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships and Medical Education, 1925–1936

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### Abstract

The Rockefeller Foundation wished to improve medical education internationally. The American philanthropic organization wanted laboratory techniques to be incorporated into medical teaching, producing clinical researchers. This writer analysed Rockefeller Foundation travelling fellowships awarded in Ireland between 1925 and 1936. Information from Rockefeller Foundation recorder cards was compared with evidence from Foundation officer diaries, contemporary journals, and newspapers.

Of the seventeen fellowships awarded, medical doctors received twelve. Surprisingly, graduates of University College Dublin received more fellowships than graduates of the older Trinity College Dublin. Most fellows undertook training in the UK and Germany while some opted to visit Johns Hopkins or Harvard. However, there was no evidence of an attempt to advance American hegemony. The selection of the fellows was non-denominational while the clinical focus was broad and was intended to have long-term impact. Substantial research grants later followed one fellowship. The Rockefeller Foundation fellowships made a significant contribution to medical education.

### Introduction

The Rockefeller Foundation is an American philanthropic organization that wished to improve medical education internationally. This wealthy, formidable agent for change wanted to produce university-educated, science-orientated medical doctors. In 1919, the Rockefeller Foundation began surveying the state of clinical education world-wide and subsequently began targeting individual institutions with funding aimed at improving their facilities. In 1925, one of the countries that the Foundation surveyed was Ireland.

The Irish Free State, under W. T. Cosgrave, had come into being on 6 December 1922 and had a 'contested legitimacy'. In reality, effective administration was virtually impossible. In 1932, Fianna Fail won the general election, amid rumours of potential 'coups' and 'counter coups'. Into this volatile situation entered Alan Gregg, an officer of the Rockefeller Foundation and one of the most influential men in medical education internationally. Gregg wished to fix scientific medicine into the future of medical culture world-wide. Hospitals were to be turned

into university teaching hospitals. To achieve his aims Gregg first reported on the political stability of the countries that he surveyed. Ireland seemed ideal but the Rockefeller model proved to be highly controversial. Historically, Irish universities turned out practical generalists rather than 'investigative scholars'.

Prior to his visits to Ireland in 1925 and 1927, Gregg described the three medical schools and ten hospitals in Dublin as 'curiously disorganised'. Gregg would have preferred just one regular medical school in Dublin, requiring significant cooperation between UCD and Trinity. The Foundation also viewed with alarm the development of a separate Irish Medical Council and the introduction of Irish language tests. Gregg feared an anticipated decrease in work opportunities within the British empire and that, without Irish, Trinity graduates would have difficulty in getting hospital jobs in the new state. Crucially, Gregg also wanted hospitals to be under academic rather than religious control. The whole area was fraught with religious, cultural, and political tensions.

Gregg observed that 'Cosgrave apparently is not very sympathetic to higher education, whose claims for some time must come behind other matters'. Putting his master plan to one side, Gregg decided against awarding funds to develop major laboratory facilities or research institutes. Instead, Gregg embarked on a more modest campaign and decided to concentrate on funding travelling fellowships.

## Methods

The Rockefeller Foundation Archive in New York retains material that documents the delicate negotiations employed to bring Foundation funding to Ireland, with a view to developing a more scientific form of medicine. The Foundation Fellowship Recorder Cards were recently digitised. The fellowship recorder cards provided basic summary information for each fellow, including their name, country of origin, and discipline. Employing a social-history methodology, primary sources utilised in this study included Foundation officer diaries and fellowship recorder cards, together with journals and newspapers from the period 1925 to 1936. Electronic databases used included the Lind Library, The Cochrane Library, and Embase. Information from the recorder cards was compared with evidence from the diaries, contemporary journals, and newspapers. The aim of the study was to increase understanding of the Rockefeller Foundation's involvement with medical education in Ireland.

The Foundation chose promising individuals and helped prepare them to make significant contributions to research and teaching. The Foundation concentrated on health issues and required fellows to be employed by universities, research institutes, or governmental bodies. Potential applicants were identified by Foundation officers and fellowships were awarded for one or two years to study outside the candidate's country of origin.

## Results

Some 17 Rockefeller Foundation fellowships were granted to candidates in the Irish Free State between 1925 and 1936. Of importance is that 5 successful candidates had received their primary degree from University College Dublin. Three fellowships were awarded to RCSI graduates, while 2 went to graduates of Trinity College Dublin. A fellowship was also awarded to 1 candidate each from University College Cork, University College Galway, and Queen's, Belfast.

The fellowship candidates ranged in age from 24 to 42 years and medical doctors were awarded 12 of the fellowships. Two nurses received the award while each of the remaining 3 successful candidates held a BSc, a DSc, or a PhD. Most doctors held the Diploma in Public Health and 9 wished to become county medical officers of health in Ireland.

The fellowship stipend was of between \$120 to \$200 per month. Eight fellows opted for the USA as a destination where they visited Johns Hopkins, Harvard, or Columbia university. One fellow, Dr James Harbison spent one year at the department of public health at Harvard. In 1925, Dr Robert Condry travelled to Boston and was later appointed chief medical officer for Cork County Council. Alice Hanrahan, a public health nurse from Kildare, travelled to Johns Hopkins and she later became Superintendent Public Health Visitor in Cork.

Some 6 fellows travelled to the United Kingdom for practical training. Dr Thomas Reynolds, a UCD graduate, travelled to England for 6 months on the recommendation of the principal medical officer. He and the other fellows were documented to have studied tuberculosis, venereal disease control, food, meat, and milk inspection, together with infant welfare.

Germany was the destination of two fellows. Dr Edward Conway spent one year in Frankfurt and later became professor of biochemistry at UCD and in 1951 the Foundation gave \$12,000 for research under Dr Conway's direction and three years later, another \$12,000. Peter Drumm, PhD, went to Heidelberg, Germany and studied under Professor Richard Kuhn who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1938. Dr Drumm subsequently became professor of biochemistry at University College Cork. One participant opted to study in Denmark, France, and Holland for 6 months.

## Discussion

The fellowship recorder cards show that the Foundation's overall approach was not narrow or short-term, as suggested. The fellowships were meant to have a long-term impact on both education and clinical practice. The destinations of the fellowships were varied and the courses followed were wide-ranging, with an emphasis on hygiene and disease prevention. Importantly, the Foundation, initially a Baptist charity, had evolved into a decidedly non-sectarian organisation. Though Gregg, a Congregationalist, felt at home at high table in Trinity,

nevertheless UCD received the most fellowships. UCD candidates received 5 fellowships as against Trinity's 2 awards. A significant sum, \$24,000, later followed a fellowship to UCD as a grant-in-aid demonstrating that the foundation's involvement with Ireland did not end in 1936.

The Foundation's 'intransigent' programmes did not view local opposition as 'simply irritation to be ironed out'. The Foundation officers were not inflexible. While the Foundation preferred the candidates to stay in one country, one fellow was financed to visit at least three countries. Though Gregg was concerned about the viability of the medical school of the Royal College of Surgeons, nevertheless, the non-denominational school received 3 fellowships. While the Galway school was seen as highly vulnerable, it also received a stipend.

There is no evidence in the recorder cards to suggest that Gregg was attempting to advance American hegemony. Gregg discouraged the naming of any building after the Foundation or the placing of photographs of J.D. Rockefeller in facilities funded by him. The majority of the selected fellows were destined to be trained in England or at European destinations rather than the USA. Gregg never contacted American embassies or individual Americans in the countries that he surveyed including Ireland. Instead, he sought the advice of W.T. Cosgrave, Professor Moorhead of TCD, or the Free State chief medical officer.

In 1922, many politicians were committed to a developmental role for government. The British Labour Government of 1923 advanced ambitious policies for the improvement of education in England and Wales. However, the restoration of the Irish language and the revival of a native culture were the Free State's aims, during very turbulent times. Culture, identity, and survival were the political focus, not medical training. In wanting to integrate bench and bedside, the Foundation's approach heightened pre-existing struggles and tensions. Social, cultural, and denominational factors meant that the Foundation was reluctant to offer large-scale investment in new research institutes or laboratories. Nevertheless, despite extremely testing conditions, the Rockefeller Foundation made a significant contribution to medical education and practice in Ireland through its innovative fellowship programme.

**Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:**

None declared.

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