

THE MEDICAL SCHOOL DIPLOMA: A CLEAR LINK TO RENAISSANCE TRADITIONS

Beginning with the first graduating class in 1852, the University of Michigan Medical School diploma was a relatively simple affair. Composed in English, it merely stated:

“_____ has this day been declared a graduate of the College of Medicine and Surgery at this University with the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Dated _____.”

The diploma was then signed by the dean and the medical school professors.

In early 1878, however, the Board of Regents received a petition from the medical students to create a new diploma in Latin based on the language used at Oxford and Cambridge. The symbolism of this motion was clear. The students wanted a link to the oldest universities, and they desired a clear link to the Renaissance tradition of granting degrees expressly in Latin to those in the learned professions (i.e., medicine, theology, law and philosophy).

Moreover, the students promised to raise \$150 toward funding a new engraving plate and the Regents approved such a change on January 22, 1878, “provided that the cost to the University did not exceed fifty dollars.” The medical students delivered only \$90 for the new plate, but the University went ahead with a new version, one dating back to the early 16th century.

A point of contention about the diploma in the past has related to the phrase which notes the date of conferring the degree. Following the date are the Latin words *anno salutis*. Some have translated



Translation of the U-M Medical School Diploma

The University of Michigan

From the Regents of the University to anyone reading this letter

Greetings

Be advised that we have awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine to

(name)

recommended to us in the usual manner by the professors of the College of Medicine and Surgery [i.e., the Medical School] as a person well-qualified in the study, discipline, and science of medicine and surgery.

In proof of this we have given him/her this letter, bearing the signatures of the President, the Secretary, and the Professors.

Done on the premises of the University on (date, year) in the year of our health in the ____ year of the University of Michigan.

this as meaning “the year of our salvation,” with its consequent religious overtones, but it actually means “the year of our health.” The Latin term for “the year of our salvation,” incidentally, is *anno salvatoris*. The phrase *anno salutis* has been commonly used on medical diplomas since the 1500s.

The Medical School’s is the largest and most beautiful diploma presented by the University. It has hung proudly in more than 100,000 doctors’ offices across the nation. Minor changes have been made over the years, such as abandoning Latinizing the graduate’s name and print-

ing the titles of the professors signing the document (rather than the professors writing them by hand). But otherwise, the University of Michigan Medical School diploma has remained constant since June 1878.

Currently, several prominent North American medical schools use a Latin version of a diploma. Many of these, by the way, include with the date the phrase *anno domini* (year of Our Lord) rather than *anno salutis*. The U-M Medical School plans to retain the language and heritage of its diploma for the future, to which, with all due respect, we say “Amen.”

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