

## Book review

## Of buffoons and scamps: the struggle for medical licensure

**Licentiate to Heal: A History of the Medical Council of Canada**

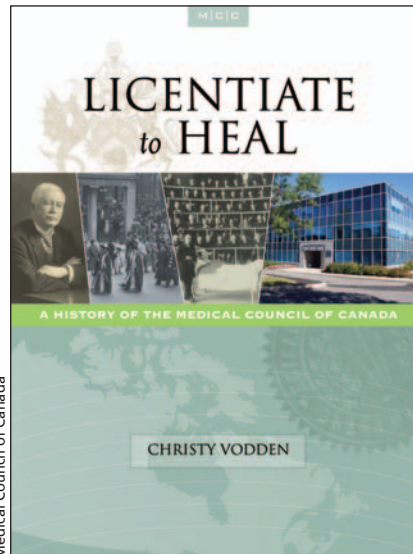
Christy Vodden

The Medical Council of Canada; 2008  
94 pp \$5.00 ISBN 978-0-9690161-8-2

The Medical Council of Canada has maintained a relatively low profile throughout its 96 years, and that's one reason why *Licentiate to Heal: A History of the Medical Council of Canada* is such interesting reading. This slim volume details the rich history of the council as it prepares to mark its centennial in 2012 and invites physicians to reflect on how far their own profession has come during that time.

So why does the council exist?

As author Christy Vodden explains, the medical profession in 19th-century Canada was so full of scamps, charlatans and incompetent buffoons that “a patient very often had a better chance



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of living without medical attention than with it.” Concerns eased somewhat as physician training moved away from the apprenticeship model and toward formal education — McGill awarded

Canada's first medical degree in 1833 — but even by Confederation “the standards for medical qualifications necessary for a licence to practise were literally all over the map.”

What was lacking was a way to provide proof of qualifications and allow physicians in a growing country to practise in every part of that country. Enter Dr. Thomas Roddick, a former Newfoundlander and past president of the Canadian Medical Association (1890).

In 1901, Roddick, who was then a member of Canada's Parliament, pleaded with Parliament to deal with the fact that “a medical man cannot cross the imaginary line between the provinces without running the risk of being fined, perhaps imprisoned, when he is attempting to save the lives of citizens of Canada.”

His tireless lobbying resulted in passage of the Canada Medical Act of 1902, but it would take almost a decade and amended legislation before all provinces were on board. The first meeting of the Medical Council of Canada took place in 1912. (The minister of agriculture, who was then responsible for “all matters pertaining to health” in Canada, was unable to attend.)

The end result of Roddick's work finally emerged on Oct. 7, 1913, when 71 doctors each paid \$100 to write the first Medical Council of Canada qualifying examination in Montréal, Quebec (44 passed). Finally, a national standard for medical competence existed.

*Licentiate to Heal* describes the hard work leading to that first meeting and first exam, and the evolution that has taken place since then. It tells the story well.

**Patrick Sullivan BA**Journalist  
Richmond, Ont.

This book is available from the Medical Council of Canada ([www.mcc.ca](http://www.mcc.ca)) at a cost of \$5.00 (plus shipping and handling). It is also available in French as: *Médecins à juste titre : Bref historique du Conseil médical du Canada*.



The first Medical Council of Canada met Nov. 7–9, 1912, in Ottawa, when a small executive committee was struck. It included W. Spankie (Ontario), E.A.P. Hardy (homeopaths, Toronto), T.G. Roddick (president, Quebec), R.S. Thornton (vice-president, Manitoba), R.E. McKechnie (British Columbia) and L.P. Normand (Quebec).

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