John Morgan Biography

John Morgan

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Biography

The American physician John Morgan (1735-1789) established the first medical department at a colonial college and was medical director of the Continental Army.

John Morgan, third son of a Welsh merchant, Evan Morgan, and Joanna Biles Morgan, was born in Philadelphia, Pa., on Oct. 16, 1735. Orphaned at 13, John attended West Nottingham School, became a medical apprentice to John Redman, and later became apothecary of the Pennsylvania Hospital. After completing requirements for the bachelor's degree in 1756 at the College of Philadelphia, he participated in frontier warfare as surgeon for the Pennsylvania troops.

Between 1760 and 1763 Morgan studied with eminent physicians in London and completed his medical degree at the University of Edinburgh. He was elected to the Académie Royale de Chirurgie de Paris, to the Royal Society of London, and to the Royal College of Physicians in London and in Edinburgh.

To improve standards of medical training in America, Morgan proposed establishing a medical school at the College of Philadelphia. Chosen professor of the theory and practice of medicine, he expounded his reforms in *A Discourse upon the Institution of Medical Schools in America* (1765). He advocated rigorous training and the separation of the professions of physician, surgeon, and apothecary. Too idealistic and egocentric to work harmoniously with others, he became an archrival of William Shippen, Jr., professor of anatomy and surgery at the college. Morgan won acclaim for his medical lectures but gave up research. After his marriage to Mary Hopkinson in 1765, he encouraged science, philosophy, and fine arts as a member of the American Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge and of the American Philosophical Society.

Morgan reluctantly supported the patriot cause during the Revolution and accepted the directorship of hospitals for the Continental Army in 1775. Faced with overwhelming problems of insufficiently trained medical personnel, scarce supplies, and congressional indifference, he became embroiled in acrimonious disputes with Dr. Shippen. Unable to prevent the collapse of the medical service, Morgan was summarily dismissed by Congress in 1777 and did not win vindication until 2 years later.

In postwar Philadelphia Morgan resumed his medical practice but was only belatedly reelected to his professorship after the reorganization of the college as the University of Pennsylvania. Shattered by his wife's death and prematurely old at 50, he withdrew from public life, reappearing briefly to participate in the founding of the College of Physicians. He died on Oct. 15, 1789.