This Month in History, June:

The American Board of Ophthalmology Examination

Beginning in the early 1900s, national leaders in medicine sought to standardize American medical education. In 1916 the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Oto-laryngology, the American Ophthalmological Society and the American Medical Association worked together to establish the first medical specialty board in the United States. The new American Board of Ophthalmology held its first examination on June 7 and 8, 1917.

To be eligible to take the exam, physicians have to complete medical school, 1 year Internship, 3 to 4 year Residency and have a valid medical license. Those who pass the exam are considered Diplomates of the American Board of Ophthalmology.

The examination has always been given in two parts. Today the oral and written exams can be separated by months. Between 1917 and 1933, however, the exam was given on one day with the written part in the morning and the oral in the afternoon. Papers were then read and graded the same day. Results were expected to be reported at the Board’s evening meeting, which at times lasted until 2:00 a.m.

Prior to the formation of the American Board of Ophthalmology, physicians all over the United States shared their concern for ophthalmic education. Here are a few of their voices:

“I hope to see the time when ophthalmology is taught in this country as it should be taught.”
- Derrick Vail, MD, 1908

“The standing of ophthalmologists as a definite class [has]... suffered greatly from the lack of...supervised systematic study.” –Edward Jackson, MD, 1912

“Suddenly [with WWI] there has come to us a loss of the opportunity for study abroad, and it is the duty of our profession to offer in this country an opportunity for a substitute education.”
- C.J. Blake, MD, 1914