

John Stearne

Born: 1624
President: 1667 – 18 November 1669
Died: 1669

John Stearne founded what is now the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland in 1654 in order to promote the study of medicine, regulate the practice of physicians in Ireland and improve medical care. He was the first President of the College, elected in 1667, and presided until he died on 18 November 1669 aged 45.

Stearne was born on 26 November 1624 and grew up at Ardraccon, County Meath, at the episcopal palace of his great-uncle James Ussher, the distinguished scholar and then Bishop of Meath. His father, John Stearne, was a barrister from Cambridge, who settled in County Down and married Mabel Bermingham, a niece of Primate Ussher.

Stearne entered Trinity College Dublin in 1639 at the age of fifteen, and was elected a Scholar in 1641. On the outbreak of the great Irish rebellion, Stearne fled to England and, in 1643, proceeded to Cambridge where he studied medicine at Sidney Sussex College and there collected material for his first work, *Animi Medela* (1653). He remained at Cambridge for about seven years and then spent some time at Oxford. Prior to his departure for England he had been elected a Fellow of Trinity College (1643), a position from which he was ejected by order of the Rump Parliament.

On his return to Ireland in 1651 he was restored to his Fellowship by the direction of Henry Cromwell (son of Oliver Cromwell) with whom he was on terms of friendship and to whom he dedicated his first book.

Stearne was a man of very broad interests receiving the degree of MD in 1658, and that of LLD in 1660. In 1656, he was appointed the first lecturer in Hebrew in Trinity College. In 1659, he resigned his Fellowship probably as a necessary preliminary to his marriage that year to Dorothy, daughter of Charles Ryves. He was appointed a Senior Fellow in 1660 after the Restoration, having received a dispensation from the statutes of the University respecting celibacy. In 1660, he was also appointed Professor of Law.

Stearne practiced as a physician in Dublin from 1651 obtaining special permission to reside outside the walls of the University.



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In 1654, he proposed to the Board of Trinity College that he should be appointed President of Trinity Hall, a building a short distance from the College in Trinity Place, off Dame Street. The building had previously been a student residence but had fallen into disuse and was in very bad repair. It had been originally erected by Dublin Corporation as a 'house of correction' for vagrants but had never actually been used for this purpose.

Stearne's aim was to promote the study of medicine, provide medical education including the teaching of anatomy and have a space for physicians to meet as a Fraternity of Physicians. He also proposed to the Board that he should be allowed to live in the building and that he would repair it from his own resources.

The arrangement was sanctioned and Trinity Hall was granted for the sole use of the Fraternity of Physicians to provide facilities for the study of medicine and a place for physicians to meet. In addition, there was a requirement that consultation and treatment of the Provost and Senior Fellows of Trinity College be provided if they happened to be sick. Stearne, on the nomination of the Provost and Senior Fellows of Trinity College in whom the appointment was vested, became its first President, a position for life. No students were to be admitted to the Fraternity who did not belong to Trinity College.

In 1662, Stearne was appointed Professor of Medicine at Trinity College and, 5 years later, he obtained a Royal Charter from King Charles II which incorporated the Fraternity as the Royal College of Physicians of Dublin. The Charter named the first fourteen Fellows of the College and confirmed Stearne as President for life. A Coat of Arms was granted to the new College along with the motto *Ratione et Experientia* (reason and experience). Under the Charter no-one could practice medicine in Dublin, or within a seven-mile radius of the city, without a license from the new College.

Stearne was a man of great vision who enjoyed the confidence of both the University and the physicians. During his relatively short life he had been extremely active and had achieved and written much. Few men in the academic sphere have accomplished more than Stearne. Ware says of him 'he was a very learned man, and more fond of the study of divinity than of his own profession in which nevertheless he had great knowledge.'¹ That he was also a man of the world is shown by the success with which he contrived to stand well both with the Cromwellian and the Royalist parties.

He had three daughters and one son, John Stearne (1660–1745), who became Bishop of Clogher and who presented a set of his father's works to Archbishop Marsh's library at Dublin.

¹ Sir James Ware quoted in Thomas Belcher, *Memoir of John Stearne, founder and first president of the College of Physicians* (Dublin: John Falconer, 1865) 38.



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John Stearne was buried, by his own request, in the chapel of Trinity College where his epitaph by his friend Henry Dodwell, in which he is described as *Philosophus, Medicus, summusque Theologus idem*, may still be read.

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