

Duncan Cumings

Born: 1656
President: 1699-1700
Died: 1724

Duncan Cumings (sometimes Comyng or Cummins), a native of Morayshire, graduated MA from Edinburgh University in 1675. He matriculated as a medical student at Leiden on 24 October 1681 aged 25. He was awarded his MD on 30 June 1684 for his thesis, *De cerebro ejusque pathologia in genere*, dedicated to the President and Members of the Edinburgh College of Physicians and to James Drummond, 4th Earl of Perth, High Chancellor and Lord Justice General of Scotland, among others. Cumings appears to have been a political refugee from Scotland as the Leiden University records for 23 June 1684 note that the English Ambassador had requested that Cumings should not be allowed to go forward for his MD. The University refused this request noting that the University was not interested in political issues but was responsible for ensuring candidates had the requisite knowledge and if the candidate met the required standard at the public disputation, the degree would be awarded.

Sometime afterwards, Cumings moved to Ireland and was admitted as a Fellow of the College of Physicians. In 1689, he was appointed as a physician to the Williamite army and in August 1691 he was at the Siege of Athlone sending upwards of 200 wounded soldiers to the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham where Sir Patrick Dun (qv) was physician. Cumings was one of the Fellows named in the 1692 Royal Charter granted to the College of Physicians. In January 1693, the College Journal notes that he was to continue for the time being in the post of Registrar, a position which was confirmed in October 1693 and which he held until October 1694. Cumings was admitted MD *ad eundem* to Trinity in 1695 following the joint decision of the College of Physicians and Trinity to admit as doctors *ad eundem* all Fellows of the College not already Doctors of Physic from Trinity.

Cumings was elected President of the College in 1699. The main issue in his presidency was the ongoing discussions with Trinity to develop an agreed procedure between the two bodies for the examining and awarding of MB and MD degrees. He was offered the presidency again in 1713 and in 1719, but declined on both occasions.

However, he remained active in College affairs, being appointed along with Thomas Molyneux (qv) to consult with lawyers on the terms of Sir Patrick Dun's will, a problem which would continue to exercise the College for many years. In April 1717, he was asked to draft a letter to Dublin apothecaries on behalf of the President to remind them they were not permitted to practise physick, and in January 1718 he suggested the drawing up of a dispensatory of drugs for use by apothecaries. The proposition was approved in April 1719 and he was tasked with drawing



up a draft; but in June 1721 the new London Dispensatory was recommended for use until the College's new dispensatory could be perfected which suggests that the draft had not advanced very far.

Cumings appears to have been instrumental in the printing, in Dublin, of *A Collection of Pamphlets containing the Way and Manner of Inoculating the Smallpox both in Britain and New England* (1722), prefaced by a letter from Cumings to the printer, George Grierson. The subject was topical as a severe epidemic of smallpox had broken out in London in 1721 which had spread quickly to Boston where the use of inoculation to control the disease was fiercely debated. The climate of opinion in Britain was more accepting and in April 1722 King George I had allowed two of his grandchildren to be inoculated. In the letter dated 19 May 1722, Cumings says he had sent the pamphlets to Grierson, who then asked him for his own views on the procedure. Despite the successful royal inoculations, Cumings' assessment was cautious and expressed the view that although on balance it appeared to save many lives, more experience was needed.

Cumings' role as a teacher was recognised by his pupil William Stephens (qv) in the dedication of his Leiden MD thesis in 1718. His last attendance in College was in June 1723 and he died in September 1724.

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