

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



### In Honor of Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran, the Founder of the First Modern Iranian Medical School

#### Abstract

Urmia is located in the northwestern part of Iran with close proximity to Turkey and Iraq borders. Urmia has an important status in Iran's medical history because it is the home of Iranian's first modern medical school, established by Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran in 1878. Joseph Plumb Cochran was born in an American missionary family in Urmia city. After graduating from New York University, School of Medicine, he returned to his birthplace in 1879 to establish the first teaching hospital in Iran which was called Westminster hospital. Even though he was very proficient in all the local languages of the region (Persian, Azari, Kurdish & Asori), he taught most of the courses in English and the first group of students graduated in 1883 under his direct supervision. The Medical School was well known for its top academic work in Iran. He worked for 27 years, visiting thousands of patients. Throughout these years, 28 physicians were graduated from this medical school. Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran died at the age of 50 from Typhoid Fever and was buried in a small Christian cemetery in the village of Sir near the city of Urmia.

**Key words:** Medical history, Iranian medical school, Joseph Plumb Cochran, American missionary, Hospitals, Medicine, Urmia, Iran

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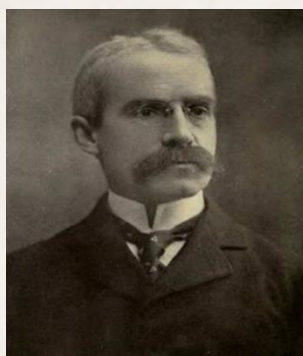


### Introduction

One of the first Christian Americans arrived in Urmia in 1835 was a physician from the Nestorian clan, named Dr. Grant, known in the West for his generosity to people of various nationalities<sup>1</sup>. After a warm welcome by the people of Urmia, he spent several years in this city. Later, a number of other American physicians arrived in Iran (Dr. Wright, Dr. Norden and Dr. Helmez). Because of his service to the people of Tabriz and Hamadan, Dr. Holmes became one of the physicians of Mozaffar al-Din Shah and his crown prince. He settled in a neighborhood called Yurt Shah. Joseph J. Cochran traveled to Urmia in 1848 as an American missionary. For 24 years, he taught children at schools of Urmia. His wife, Deborah Plumb, was also a generous woman who worked very hard to help the poor. According to the accounts of the old people of that time, he used to give the best of his home to the most needy<sup>2,3</sup>.

### Doctor Joseph Plumb Cochran (1855–1905)

From this benevolent couple a child named Joseph Plumb Cochran (Figure 1) was born on January 14, 1855 in Urmia. He also followed the path of his parents. In 1868, after completing his primary education in Iran at the age of 15, he went to the USA. He completed his education with a keen interest in medical sciences and finished his internships at New York's most renowned hospitals under the supervision of renowned physicians and surgeons. Dr. Cochran officially graduated in 1878, and in the same year, while traveling to Minnesota, he met a woman named Katharine Hale, and married her, and returned to Urmia from the United States<sup>4,5</sup>.



*Figure 1. Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran, Founder of the First Modern Iranian Medical School. (Photo taken in 1878 A.D 1295 A.H.) The image is reproduced with permission<sup>6</sup>, Copyright (1907).*

### Westminster Hospital in Urmia (1895)

Two years before the occurrence of famine in Urmia

- 1- Shade, 1907: 20-61.
- 2- Afshar, 2017: 760.
- 3- Cochran, 2019: n.p.
- 4- Shade, 1907: 20-61.
- 5- Yourdshahian, 2002: 127-8.
- 6- Shade, 1907: 6.



(1880), Dr. Cochran purchased a 3-acre garden full of beautiful plantations and meadows, and began building a large building with forty beds in 1878. However, in times of emergency, more patients were admitted. The building had four sections. The first part was built in 1879, consisting of three large rooms and three smaller rooms for male patients, an operating theater, and a large dining room. The second part, which was built several years later, included a pharmacy and several operating theaters. The third section, which was founded in 1890, was reserved for women, with 4 rooms for patients and one room for surgery and one for the physician-in-residence (Dr. Emma Miller)<sup>7</sup>. At that time, the culture dominated the society would not accept an Iranian woman be visited and treated by a male doctor. Emma Miller left Iran in 1909 and was replaced by Dr. Laura McComb, the wife of a famous missionary. The fourth section also contained a separate small room devoted to patients with dangerous and contagious diseases. The building was the first modern and well-equipped Iranian hospital, known as the Westminster (Figure 2) which was derived from the name of a church in the United States. Dr. Cochran talked with the authorities and church members about the importance of building a hospital in Urmia. They accepted to pay the costs of the hospital. It is worth noting that a prominent member of the Buffalo city church, Samuel Clement, donated a large portion of the costs for the construction and administration of the hospital. Brigadier General Seldouz, Pastor Yukhan Khannis, Khan Odisho Golpashini and Mirza David Malik of Gog Tapeh contributed to the hospital's annual expenses<sup>8,9</sup>.

7- Shade, 1907: 20-61.

8- Afshar, 2017: 760.

9- Packard, 2003: 18-43.

10- Shade, 1907: 20-61.

### **The First Medical School in Urmia and Iran**

Naturally, several doctors were needed to run such a hospital, and Dr. Cochran was never able to manage it by himself. So he decided to use the ambitious and talented Assyrian youth and immediately began teaching medical students. Another large building constructed in the garden was the American Mission School of Medicine (Figure 3), which was completed in 6 years under the supervision of Dr. Cochran. In fact, it was the first modern medical school in Iran built near the hospital for medical training. Dr. Cochran was a hard-working person and did not have any free time at all. Despite this, he decided to set up a modern college and endeavored to teach students interested in studying medicine<sup>10</sup>.

The modern building of the Medical School can be seen in the campus of the schools of Urmia University of Medical Sciences in Figure 4. An update on statistics related to Medical School of Urmia University of Medical Sciences is



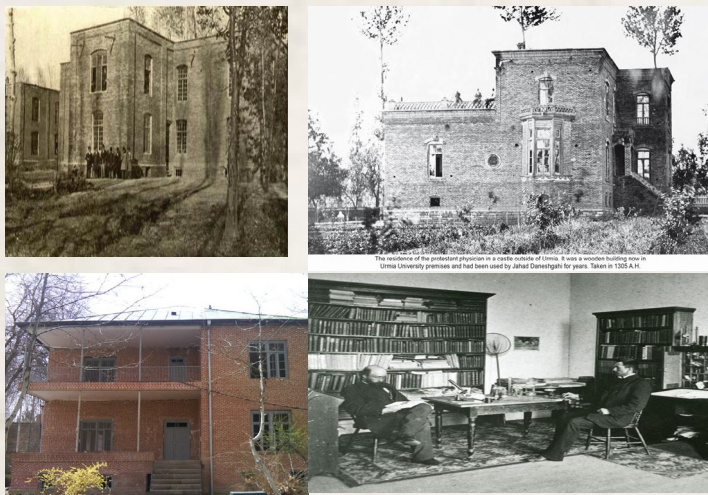


showed in Table 1. Urmia University of Medical Sciences is located in Urmia, West Azarbaijan province, North-West of Iran.

11- Shade, 1907: 23, 39.  
12- Shade, 1907: 24.



*Figure 2. (A) and (B): The Westminister Hospital in Urmia, 1895, (C): The Westminister Hospital as an Educational Hospital, the First Modern Medical School in Iran, established by Dr. Joseph P. Cochran, (D): Pharmacy of the West-Minister Hospital. These images are reproduced with permission<sup>11</sup>, Copyright (1907).*



*Figure 3. The old wooden building can still be seen near the present-day Urmia University in Daneshkade Avenue. These images are reproduced with permission<sup>12</sup>, Copyright (1907)*



Figure 4. Current Urmia Medical Faculty, 2020

**Table 1:** Statistics Related to Urmia School of Medicine, 2020.

Statistics	Number
Number of faculty members employed by Urmia Medical School	226
Faculty Member of Basic Sciences	68
Clinical Faculty Member	151
Faculty Member	12
Full Professors	21
Associate Professors	53
Assistant Professors	143
junior lecturer	2
Number of basic medical students	400
Number of Students	219
Number of Extern students	345
Number of Intern students	225
Number of students admitted to Medicine per year	160
Number of residents in 12 medical specialties	240
Number of graduates in medical specialty per year	60-65

**Scholarly fields:** 1. Surgery General; 2. Neurology; 3. Neurosurgery; 4. Radiology; 5. Internal medicine; 6. Pediatrics; 7. Gynecology; 8. Cardiovascular Diseases; 9. Urology; 10. Anesthesia; 11. Orthopedic; 12. Pathology.

Students who started their medical training under the supervision of Dr. Cochran graduated in 1883. Their courses included physiology, chemistry, anatomy, internal diseases, surgery, midwifery, and orthopedics. Most of medical courses were taught by Dr. Cochran himself and other courses (non-medical) were taught by other instructors, including Katharine Hale, his wife. Dr. Cochran was fluent in Persian, Turkish, and Assyrian and used to teach in these languages; however, later when the students learned English, the courses were taught in English. He also taught them all medical operations while performing surgery at the hospital. The students spent eight to ten months studying, and they spent the rest of the year in the hospital under his supervision. All students attended the boarding school and paid monthly tuition fees. During his lifetime, a total of 27 male medical students and

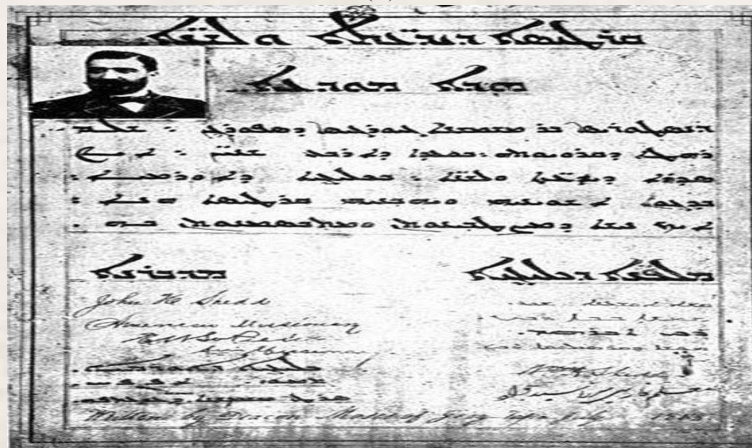




one female student graduated from Urmia Medical School. The first graduate student was Oshankhan Golpashini, who was the son of Professor Golpashini. A picture of his degree is provided below (Figure 5). Dr. Cochran encouraged Oshankhan to go to Edinburgh, Scotland to complete his medical training. Then he returned to Urmia after a short period of time<sup>13</sup>.



(A)



(B)

Figure 5. (A): The first medical degree in Iran belongs to Oshanakhan Badal Golpashini (B): The medical degree in Iran in Asori language

All graduates of this university until 1904 are listed below. The first group of graduates from this faculty who succeeded in obtaining a doctorate degree in 1883 were Dr. Oshanakhan, Dr. Israel, Dr. Shevil, Dr. Yohanna, and Dr. Alishah. The second group who graduated in 1890 were Dr. Davood (who was initially assistant in the hospital and later went to London to complete medical education) and Dr. Daniel Simon. The third group of graduates were Dr. Afsheliman, Dr. Bagher Khan Khoni, Dr. Shalimoun, Dr. Alexander Wass, Dr. Aghasi, and Dr. Davoud Ghare Hassanloo. The fourth group

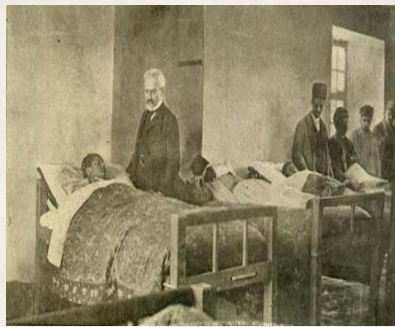


of students who completed their medical education in 1900 were Dr. Babre, Dr. Anwiyeh, Dr. Luther, Dr. Ibrahim, Dr. Hashim Khan Khui, Dr. Mirza Ali Khui, and Dr. Al-Khas. The fifth and last graduates who graduated in 1904 were Dr. Eskandar Khan, Dr. Schmuil, Dr. bahbah, Dr. Mir Sadegh Khoni, Dr. Baba Khan Khoi, and Ms. Miller<sup>14, 15</sup>.

Dr. Cochran cured about 10,000 patients during his medical career. According to the hospital record, he examined and treated over 5783 patients in West Azerbaijan in his hospital over the course of his five-year-medical career, of which 1,100 patients underwent surgery for diseases like kidney stones, cataracts, etc. With the exception of two, all were well treated and healed. According to the Westminster Hospital's one-year registry, approximately 4 different types of diseases were treated by Dr. Cochran and his experienced colleagues (Figure 6). Hospital records show that in one single year he visited 1145 patients and in another year, he visited 1208 patients in 38 villages around Urmia. The number of patients he visited indicate what a hard-working person he was<sup>16</sup>.



(A)



(B)

*Figure 6. (A): Dr. Cochran visiting the patients and their relatives in Urmia Medical School Hospital in 1880 (B): Dr. Cochran visiting patients in Urmia hospital in 1897. These images are reproduced with permission<sup>17</sup>, Copyright (1907).*

Dr. Cochran had a good relationship with the patients, especially the Kurds (Figure 7), and people had nicknamed him 'the wise doctor'. In 1880, a great famine happened in this part of Iran, Urmia, which killed thousands of people. At that time, the American Christians living on the hillside of Mount Sir in the village of Sir donated a large sum of money to help the hungry and needy people. Dr. Cochran was very active in collecting and distributing money to the poor<sup>18, 19</sup>.

In 1895, his wife, who abandoned all her wealth and luxury in America and became a faithful companion and partner for him, passed away and caused him deep sorrow. The result of their marriage was a daughter and four sons<sup>20</sup>.

14- Ibid.

15- Yourdshahian, 2002: 127-8.

16- Ibid.

17- Shade, 1907: 7.

18- Shade, 1907: 20-61.

19- Afshar, 2017: 760.

20- Ibid.







- 21- Shade, 1907: 11, 31.  
 22- Shade, 1907: 20-61.  
 23- Yourdshahian, 2002: 127-8.  
 24- Azizi, 2014: 733-93.

*Figure 7. (A): Dr. Cochran had good relationship with Kurdish Sheikh and also with their patients (B): Dr. Cochran among patients in Hospital. These images are reproduced with permission<sup>21</sup>, Copyright (1907).*

On August 18, 1905, after 27 years of service to the community, Dr. Cochran passed away at the age of 50 in the second floor of the wooden building of the Urmia Medical School. He was buried in the American cemetery in the village of Sir. American cemetery is located on the hillside of Mount Sir in the village of Sir which is home to an ancient church dating back to 1,600 years ago (Figure 8). The Americans who came to serve the deprived population of the area were buried in this cemetery. Although Dr. Harry Pakard had succeeded Dr. Cochran as the surgeon in charge for training students and keeping the medical school active, the medical school lost its prosperity and consequently due to lack of instructors, the students left the school. It is not possible to mention all he did in this short article. However, it is suffice to mention his benevolent character in helping Iranian people. Throughout his lifetime, he spent all his income for performing medical services and helping the poor. Prior to his death, he asked his friends and those around him to repeat the words of Jesus in the Gospel during his burial “The person who is greatest among you will be your servant”. This demand reflects his commitment to serve people. He was a faithful, honest, and god-fearing man who loved his fellow men, and his priorities were protecting and restoring patient’s health. Due to his sincere efforts and services, Nasser-e-Din Shah awarded him ‘the lion and sun’ badge which was one of the special privileges of the Iranian government at that time. Because of his enormous popularity, over 2000 people attended his funeral, and memorial service. Dr. Cochran, the American-Iranian doctor, will always remain alive in history<sup>22-24</sup>.







Figure 8. The American Cemetery in Village Sir of Urmia City, Iran, 2005.

After Dr. Cochran's death and the closure of the Medical School and Hospital, the French built a hospital in Urmia in 1917. Then, Dr. Cochran's son, Irom Cochran, founded the Memorial Hospital of Dr. Cochran (Figure 9)<sup>25</sup>.



Figure 9. (A) The ceremony for nurses graduated from Cochran Memorial Hospital. Dr. Cochran's son Joseph P. Cochran Jr. (Black suit) is standing on the left (B) The first nursing students graduated from Cochran Memorial Hospital. In back row stand Dr. Laura Muller, Wilma Pease RN and Dr. Joseph P. Cochran Jr. 1931. The image is reproduced with permission<sup>26</sup>, Copyright (2017).

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all Christian Americans physicians who devoted their life to helping patients and people in Urmia, providing them with valuable services. Peace be upon their soul.

25- Afshar, 2017: 760.

26- Ibid.



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