THE BIRTH OF A MEDICAL JOURNAL

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The history which follows concerns the development of the *Journal of the College of General Practitioners*. It is largely factual history and so must necessarily reveal something of the development of the College itself.

Readers will need no reminder of the steps which led up to the foundation of the College in 1952. A complete framework for the activities of the College was prepared by a committee of distinguished doctors, including not only general practitioners but also consultants under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Willink who had at one time been Minister of Health. Great credit must be given to this steering committee for producing a Memorandum of Association which has not since required any major alteration.

The object of the College was to maintain and improve the standard and status of general practice. This was to be done by improving undergraduate instruction in general practice, by increasing the number and calibre of postgraduate courses and lectures, and by stimulating research into problems which could best be solved by family doctors. Since its foundation the College has concentrated most of its efforts on these three objects. A further aim was inserted in its Memorandum of Association which was almost a corollary of the clauses dealing with research: 'To encourage the publication by general medical practitioners of original work on medical or scientific subjects connected with medicine'. The development of the *Journal* did not, however, begin as a direct result of this clause, and, looking back, it is almost as though it had grown of itself. The first meeting of the research committee of the College was held in Bath, one day in early spring (March 29, 1953). It was a momentous meeting which will be remembered by all those taking part in it. There was no secretary, no treasurer, and no funds, but a chairman was found willing to shoulder, if necessary, all the secretarial and most of the other work of the committee; an arrangement agreeable to all.

At that meeting three types of general-practitioner research workers were recognized. The

independent worker with an objective such as an M.D. thesis; the worker whose interests were shared with others, and who might wish to join with others to study an interest common to all of them; and the practitioner who would be willing to collect information in his practice for central analysis. Methods had to be devised for keeping those whose interest fell into the last two groups informed of each other's interests and problems. For this purpose a research register was compiled. Those joining were asked to give some basic facts about their practice and indicate their interests. The establishment of the register was achieved by a notice published in *The British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet* of January 31, 1953. To keep the research register alive and prevent it becoming a card index for the use of only a selected few, it was proposed that a newsletter should be circulated to all whose names appeared on the register and that each issue should contain the names and special interests of fresh entries. Four of these newsletters were issued for the Research Committee by their chairman at irregular intervals, each number containing more editorial matter than its predecessor. The first was three foolscap sheets of duplicated typescript, the fourth contained much interesting material from many contributors in its 25 quarto pages. Through the kindness of the editor, each number was reprinted in *The Practitioner*, and this gave them a wide publicity.

It was at this stage, after the issue of *Research Newsletter No. 4* in April 1954, that the research committee realized that too much was being shouldered by their chairman and that, whether he liked it or no, the work of the committee must be more equally shared. In the share-out the task of editing the newsletter fell to me: with no previous experience of editing, little of writing, a complete ignorance of the niceties of punctuation and an inherent inability to spell, I felt singularly ill-equipped for the job. However, *Newsletter No. 5* was already complete and only required to be made up. The difficulty of getting a somewhat bulky document cyclostyled near home and the

continued increase of material presented for publication made it necessary to go into print, and here began the first awakening. Although the printing firm selected was most helpful and promised to re-spell my words and punctuate my sentences, I soon found to my dismay that every orthographical error perpetrated was most accurately perpetuated. 'And now,' said the master printer, 'we must decide on a policy of capitalization'. It took me some time to find out what he meant, and capital letters are still a nightmare.

Since then we have struggled on, the editorial work being done by myself and my assistant editor, Dr. J. F. Burdon, with the ready help of a small band of voluntary readers and book reviewers. The first printed newsletter (No. 6) contained 32 pages. The first issue this year contained 130 with 30 pages of advertisements. Editorial policy has always been to give preference to articles written by general practitioners, though lectures given by consultants in symposia or delivered to faculties of the college are also considered. To keep the editor from being too impolitic and to give general advice on the format and content of the journal, a distinguished editorial board was selected from members of the research committee. The same board has served faithfully and given the editor the greatest possible support since 1955. *Newsletter No. 7* was the first to be circulated to all members of the College and the title *Journal of the College of General Practitioners* was adopted in 1958.

Long reports were published as separate *supplements*, an arrangement which made it easier to spread to others likely to be interested the views of the College on important subjects and the findings of research projects. Amongst these supplements have been the report on *The Complications of Measles* (1956), in which the practice of giving antibiotics and sulphonamides as a prophylactic was studied and with minor reservations found to be ineffective; and *An Obstetric Survey* which described the practice of midwifery amongst the College membership of the South-west England Faculty (1957).

The *Journal* now circulates to some 5,000 members and associates in this country and in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and in many other parts of the world and is to be found in most medical libraries. As the growth and influence of the College increases its progress will be reflected in the quality of the *Journal*.

To undertake the production of a journal without any training was bold: looking back, I am horrified at my presumption, and I still have moments of agony, especially after we have gone to press. What are the lessons I have learned?

Not indeed spelling or punctuation: these mysteries remain. The first concerns my own writing. I now know that no one can sit down and just dash off a presentable article, and that even the best and most experienced writers must make several drafts. This none of my teachers had impressed upon me. I have further learnt that when at last, after several drafts, I have managed to write an article which satisfies me, I am wise to put it aside for several weeks: when taken up afresh I am surprised, and sometimes humiliated, to find how much can be improved and how many frills cut out. Again, nothing is lost by taking a second opinion. The mother often sees no fault in her baby; even so does the author turn a blind eye to the faults of the child of his imagination, and it rests with an honest friend to disabuse him.

Never before had I realized the difference between the typescript and the printed paper. Misprints, spelling mistakes, and the lavish use of capital letters are passed over unnoticed in the typescript; indeed, we are all of us conditioned to them in this our 'Paper State'; in print such errors shriek at us aloud.

Nearly always, I have found my authors kind and patient. One of the difficulties in the publication of a quarterly journal is the long delay which often occurs between the acceptance of an article and its publication. It is seldom possible to have a clear idea of the content of issues beyond the one in hand and the one after. If no decision is arrived at on a paper within a reasonable time the author is apt to become restive. If his paper is accepted on its merit it still may have to wait a considerable time before publication, because official and College reports and items of important news may arrive at the last minute and, for various reasons, have to be inserted, and away goes the author's proof back into its file to wait a little longer.

There are two kinds of author who require to be treated with circumspection: those who have something good, new or useful to contribute, but who, alas, have not the faintest idea how to say it; and those whose chief aim is to see their names in print. The first class is the easier to deal with; being so steeped in their subject they plunge deep into the middle of their story with no soft opening words to lure the reader on. Frequently in their enthusiasm they forget that even the most exciting subject needs to be communicated in understandable English; they jot down thoughts and facts higgledy-piggledy, stringing them together with chains of unnecessary (1)s, (2)s, (3)s, and (a)s, (b)s, and (c)s. These industrious souls never object to having their work rehashed, and if asked to rewrite it themselves, do so without hesitation

and express their gratitude at being asked. The only danger from the editor's point of view is that the re-write may be little better than the first endeavour and sometimes it is wiser to do the editing oneself. Those who write for glory are a different kettle of fish. No rehash for them; they resent, if they notice it, any editorial correction, but to be fair, they seldom do notice.

The *Journal* of the College has tried to help general practitioners by giving them a vehicle

through which they may communicate their many and varied interests. Its pages have endeavoured to reflect general practice from within. That is the only excuse for the publishing of yet another medical journal. For me the work has been exciting and most rewarding, though at times it has been difficult to combine it with active practice and prevent it from impinging on the many other interests which are necessary if one is to retain an awareness of current medical thought.

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