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Panel Discussions

For some years the Panel Discussion has been widely used by the medical profession in the United States of America and as this method of conducting a medical meeting has now appeared on this side of the Atlantic Ocean it is perhaps worth while discussing the points for and against a system which has become very popular in the U.S.A.

A panel is formed by a chairman and about six other members, all experts in the subject under review. The usual practice is for the chairman to give a brief introductory statement in which he outlines the general lines upon which he intends to direct the discussion. This is followed by a short statement by each member on some aspect of the subject and then the panel answers questions from the audience and enters into a relatively free discussion amongst itself. At first these Panel Discussions were good and a lot of valuable information was made available to the audience in a comparatively short space of time; few words were wasted and the participants vied with each other to put their points over as clearly and as quickly as possible. Whilst this still holds good for many such discussions, there is an increasing tendency for some participants in this type of

discussion to adopt the defensive tactics of a politician when confronted with a direct question, and to say nothing in a dull but plausible and wordy monologue. However, the method has merit and when the chairman is good he can put such people in their place by telling them to answer the question and not skirt round it.

A great advantage of this system is that it enables a number of experts to appear together. This is of particular value to the type of conference which has postgraduate education as one of its aims; in this case members of the audience have the opportunity of putting their own problems to the panel in the form of questions, and although they may receive widely divergent answers from the experts they should be able to gain something from their combined experience.

Can we improve the Panel Discussion now that it has come to Britain? Yes, in many ways, particularly if we insist on a strong chairman who is prepared to enforce his commands, and also if we realize that these discussions are not meant to take the place of a formal paper. Their real object should be to answer the questions and solve the problems of the audience.