The Postgraduate Medical Journal – a retrospective view

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The Diamond Jubilee of the Postgraduate Medical Journal is an outstanding landmark in the impressive history of the evolution of postgraduate education and training both in London and throughout the United Kingdom. The present issue of the Journal celebrates this occasion and I am conscious of the privilege to write this article by invitation embodying happy memories and experiences centred on the Journal as I knew it fifty years ago.

In the issue of the Journal in May, 1936 the announcement was made that the present writer (R.W.R.) had accepted the invitation of the Executive Committee of the Fellowship of Medicine and Post-Graduate Medical Association to be the assistant honorary editor of the Journal. The President was the Rt Hon. Lord Moyr-Nathan of Leeds and the honorary officers and members of the Executive Committee were distinguished physicians and surgeons, and as a young man I was honoured and delighted to accept this important post. In addition, I became closely associated in the work of the Journal with Dr Leonard Findlay, a distinguished paediatrician, who was the honorary editor. Mention must be made of the devoted and indefatigable work of Miss Mona Worth as secretary, who, with her secretarial staff working in the Royal Society of Medicine by kind permission, did so much to develop the international work of the Fellowship and its journal.

One reason for my appointment was probably my active participation in postgraduate medical education and training, which has been an abiding interest throughout my professional life, and my literary contributions to the Journal which had already been published. My first article entitled ‘Stenosis of the Oesophagus’ appeared in the issue of November 1933, where I wrote ‘It is a mistake to consider palliative treatment only for cancer of the oesophagus. It is possible to excise the whole oesophagus and a new tube can be constructed which will serve the act of deglutition.’ This was followed by my article on ‘Radium Treatment of Cancer’ in the Journal of February, 1935. At that time I was Registrar of Statistics to the National Radium Commission, and I wrote ‘the object of this paper is to show what is being done with radium in cancer of the more important sites in the body. Regarding the future it is quite impossible to forecast the essential place which radium will hold in therapeutics. From the work which has already been carried out it appears that we have in radium a powerful weapon in the warfare against cancer. It is essential that we should know all about its properties and control its activities and put them to the best possible advantage.’

The Editor and I continued to invite challenging articles for the Journal having a special interest for postgraduates, focussing their attention on newer developing subjects, on present methods of diagnosis and treatment of important diseases, especially where different opinions, or indeed controversy, existed. We also endeavoured to satisfy by appropriate articles the need of instructing postgraduates who were working for higher degrees and diplomas in medicine and surgery. To attain our objectives we invited recognized authorities to contribute these articles for publication in the Journal.

During the decade preceding the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, important developments were occurring in the evolution of postgraduate medical education and training, and since the Journal was such a vital catalyst in this work I will now refer to those exciting years.

Pioneer teaching was initially done in the closing years of the last century at the Medical Graduate College and Polyclinic, and also by the staff of the West London Postgraduate College. Shortly after Sir William Osler came to this country in 1904 he formed the Post-Graduate Medical Association to coordinate all the clinical facilities which existed in London for advanced studies in medicine. The First World War was a severe temporary interference, but when the conflict ceased the Fellowship of Medicine was formed and amalgamated with the Post-Graduate Medical Association in 1919. Since that time this conjoint organization, served by some of the most distinguished members of our profession, has coordinated and stimulated education and training for large numbers of postgraduates in medicine, surgery and other specialities.


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The major effort was made in London where a large variety of special courses of instruction were arranged, so that postgraduate visitors could choose from those in cardiology, gynaecology, ophthalmology, paediatrics, oto-rhino-laryngology and endoscopy. Series of special lectures were also given entitled 'Practical Hints in Medicine, Surgery, and Allied Specialities'.

The impact of all this teaching was considerable and its fame spread far beyond the confines of London. Thus, in the Journal of October, 1927 we read 'up to the time of going to press we have had requests for eleven postgraduate lecturers or demonstrators to be sent to provincial centres during the coming session. There is every possibility that the scheme will be popular. The Fellowship will, on application to the Secretary, always be pleased to make arrangements for any town from the panel of lecturers it has prepared.'

Higher examinations

Special consideration was given to the needs of postgraduates, both of this and other countries, who were studying for the F.R.C.S. and M.R.C.P. examinations. In 1930 an announcement was made in the Journal that an evening course of instruction for the final F.R.C.S. examination would be held from 8 October to 12 November at the Medical Society of London. Each Demonstrator in the course would provide two cases; the class divided into two so that each Demonstrator would take each group in turn. The candidates were given the opportunity to examine patients and questioned on the diagnosis, pathology and treatment. It is interesting for us to read today that 'the Course is open to women.'

An evening course for candidates working for the examination for the M.R.C.P., comprising lectures given twice weekly and two special demonstrations in ophthalmology, was also arranged. This aspect of postgraduate teaching was an important beginning.

Development

The help of these courses to candidates was considerable and many postgraduates, including those from overseas, availed themselves of this support. It is recorded in the Journal how the Fellowship had planned to provide candidates with the opportunity to study interesting groups of patients and with the examinations before them to enjoy a certain amount of 'ragging calculated to stimulate the mind clogged with bookwork.' I was privileged to teach in these classes, with other colleagues who were skilled in teaching techniques and I recall many evenings so profitably spent at the National Temperance Hospital where we were so kindly given excellent facilities for our larger classes to be held.

There was an increasing demand for longer courses of instruction by candidates preparing themselves for the Final examination for the F.R.C.S. who could attend daytime classes in hospitals. Those doctors who could not attend in the daytime had the chance to familiarize themselves with the general standards required by the Colleges in the evening classes. I recall the enthusiasm of Miss Mona Worth at the Fellowship headquarters in helping me to arrange special courses in surgery for candidates preparing for the Final F.R.C.S. examination. These courses lasted for three months and during this time I gave lectures, tutorials, corrected written papers, and conducted clinical ward rounds at the Royal Cancer Hospital (now the Royal Marsden Hospital). These courses also included the teaching of operative surgery on the cadaver, for at that time candidates had to perform actual operations on the cadaver at Examination Hall in Queen's Square, London. I enjoyed this work immensely for I made lasting friendships with young colleagues from many countries, in addition to the satisfaction engendered when so many of them succeeded in their examination.

The Journal played a most helpful part in all this education and training on an international scale. A splendid section was headed 'General Post-Graduate News' where all the details of advanced courses and other courses and lectures were given. Under this heading 'standing arrangements', doctors could see the magnitude of this postgraduate teaching by noticing the extensive hospital facilities, including clinical assistantships, and the detailed instruction which was given in many specialities.

Editorial Announcement in the Journal January 1934

It was stated that '1934 inaugurates a new era in Post-Graduate Teaching,' for during that year the new Post-Graduate Hospital at Hammersmith would be opened. It had always been appreciated that for total success in postgraduate education and training a district hospital for its own use was essential to provide opportunities for all types of postgraduate students. The Journal stated that with such a general hospital and numerous special hospitals the whole range of advanced study would be available. It was explained that in 1931 the Chamberlain Committee, founded in 1925 under the aegis of the Ministry of Health, acquired on behalf of the Government, University of London and the London County Council the Hammersmith Hospital for the purposes of a Postgraduate Medical School. This hospital was enlarged and equipped and provided with a hostel for resident students.

This important editorial announcement ended with
these words: ‘Thus England with her persistent adherence to ideals and her usual doggedness has again won through and has so continued that London with the clinical wealth of the Metropolis, the facilities of a first-class advanced School of Medicine and the experienced coordinating power of the whole by the Fellowship of Medicine will be second to no other centres in the world for Postgraduate Study’.

The outbreak of the Second World War

On the outbreak of war in 1939 the Journal, which was then under the editorship of Dr Ernest Fletcher and myself, published a series of articles which we had invited to be written by experts, including those with a large experience during the First World War, on the management of war wounds and injuries. As Editors we were concerned to secure and correlate modern views about this all important subject to help all those to be responsible for the injured and wounded. We edited the book War Wounds and Injuries which was published by Edward Arnold & Co., London in September, 1940 ‘based on Articles in the Postgraduate Medical Journal’. The Foreword was written by Lord Horder who stated ‘the help that this little book can give is urgent’; the Introduction was written by Mr H.S. Souttar.

Conclusion

I have woven into this article my happy memories of fifty years ago, which was such an exciting and stimulating time when postgraduate education and training were showing remarkable growth. I retain vivid recollections of my association with the Postgraduate Medical Journal and the friends and colleagues who formed such an efficient team of experts. The Journal has played a significant rôle in this historic medical education enterprise, both as a communicator and instructor. Tremendous changes have occurred, but there is no sign of any decay. The national system of postgraduate medical education and training which operates today under the aegis of our Royal Colleges, Universities, British Postgraduate Medical Federation and Institutes and Hospitals is characterized by the highest standards and quality. The Journal continues to stand in an imposing central position and its future strength is assured.