

there was much interest in Europe, as in Britain, in sensitizing medical students to the personal side of medicine. Four general practitioners in a French medical school at Bobigny described an excellent programme with students, which included discussion of patients in the wards with groups of students and consultant staff. Two of the British students who were acting as ushers expressed the wish that their medical schools (which shall be nameless) paid as much attention to such matters!

We made what is no doubt the usual mistake of packing too much into the programme. The best part of the conference was informal discussions in the coffee

room, where little groups conversing in many languages had to be broken up and chivvied back to the lecture theatres—which is hardly in the best Balint tradition!

Yet the conference helped us to see that however much we may have diverged in forms of training and organization, and whatever the differences of language and culture, the problems in the doctor/patient relationship are much the same everywhere.

The next conference will be in Cologne, probably in May 1981.

CYRIL GILL

Honorary Secretary

OBITUARY

George Francis Abercrombie, VRD, MA, MD, HON. FRCGP

GEORGE Abercrombie was born in 1896. His father was a solicitor. He was educated at Charterhouse School, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and at St Bartholomew's Hospital. During the First World War, while still a medical student at Cambridge with only three months' clinical experience gained at Addenbrooke's, he joined the Royal Navy (1917-1918) as a surgeon-probationer. During 10 months he served in five different destroyers, including HMS Warwick when she was chosen by Admiral Keyes as his flagship for the Zeebrugge Raid. In that action young George Abercrombie was mentioned in despatches.

The Royal Navy remained one of the chief interests of his life. He had a long and distinguished association with the London Division of the RNVR. He served again during the Second World War (1939-1945), ending up with the rank of surgeon captain. He more than deserved his VRD. In 1950 he was appointed Honorary Physician to HM King George VI. On one occasion he attended a Levée at Buckingham Palace in that capacity with a small bottle of smelling salts in his pocket!

In 1918, after the First World War, he returned to Cambridge to finish the BA course before going on to Bart's to complete his medical training and do house appointments, with one more later at the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street. Then he entered general practice in Hampstead, with a special interest in obstetrics. He stayed there, except for the war years, until he retired in 1966. *The Times* has said he "epitomized all that was best in the great tradition of British general practice". He was President of the Hampstead Medical Society, assistant in the antenatal department at Bart's, and Lecturer in General Practice

at that hospital. He did much for the King's Fund, and was Chairman of the Emergency Bed Service for 15 years.

In 1950 he was appointed first President of the newly-formed Section of General Practice of the Royal Society of Medicine. His address there in 1951 on "The Occasional Obstetrician" was full of interest. He did a great deal for the new Section which earned him later the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Society of Medicine. From the start that Section proved a success. It has been described recently as "one of the strongest in the Society". It played an important part in the early days of the even-younger College of General Practitioners, with close liaison being maintained between the two. No fewer than six members of its first two Councils were on the Steering Committee which founded the new College.

When George Abercrombie was invited to join the Steering Committee in May 1952 he hesitated at first, but not for long; and he soon became one of its most valued members. On the day the College was founded (19 November 1952) he was appointed Chairman of the Provisional Foundation Council. Soon after its foundation one of the most pleasing donations we received was from his mother, Mrs G. K. Abercrombie. In turn he became Chairman of the full Foundation Council and of the first three Councils of the College (1953-1956). He was President of the College for three years (1959-1962). During that time he played an important part in acquiring our new building (14 Princes Gate, London SW7), the President's chain of office (which he wore when his portrait was painted), and the College's Coat of Arms. Many members of our early Councils will remember the excellent dinners he arranged in HMS President on the evenings before our annual general meetings.

I have always thought that during these years George

Abercrombie proved himself to be the best Chairman our College has ever had. A favourite book of his, which he carried often in his pocket, was on committee procedure. He must have known it almost by heart. How well many of us must remember that he always refused to allow anyone to move an amendment to an amendment, which he considered quite against the rules. He appreciated good English and good writing. With R. M. S. McConaghey he was joint editor of *The British Encyclopaedia of General Practice*.

His James Mackenzie Lecture in November 1959 on "The Art of Consultation" was a masterpiece. It was delivered to more than 300 members and associates, their relatives, families and friends. The College's Seventh Annual Report said of it:

Everyone who was present will remember the "stroll together down Harley Street" on which the speaker took his audience, the delightful delivery, the sound common sense of what he said, and his humour. "It is rather a good idea to regard the husband as one of the physical signs!" . . . "Choose your man well . . . who by training and by temperament is the most suitable for the matter in hand, His position in the profession, his standing in his specialty, his skill, his appearance, his manner, and his gift of tongues have all to be considered . . . Meet him yourself, remember that he is not infallible" . . . "The family doctor must learn to manage not only the patient and his relations and friends, but upon occasion his specialist colleagues also . . . He must remain in charge and in control unless, with the patient's consent, he delegates his authority to another, temporarily, and for some special purpose." . . . The good practitioner should appreciate every consultation for its "priceless opportunities of keeping up to date" and for "refreshing the confidence of his patients".

Our young, fast-developing College owed him an enormous debt which we never seemed able to repay properly. One of the many things by which he will be remembered is the George Abercrombie Award for meritorious literary work in general practice by a fellow, member, or associate of the College.

One of his favourite recreations was mountain climbing. He was a member of the Alpine Club and he climbed the Matterhorn three times. He climbed also in the Lofoten Islands. He was good at chess and he won a game against Capablanca when that famous player was taking part in simultaneous exhibition games with several opponents. He enjoyed being a member of the Sherlock Holmes Society and wrote a celebrated paper about Dr Watson. I remember being his guest at one of the Society's dinners called "The Orange Pip Feast" based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story of "The Five Orange Pips". In the soup were five orange pips, and

there were five pips on the plate for each subsequent course!

George Abercrombie was a great and popular figure who enjoyed life to the full: an excellent doctor, a hard worker, a steady, firm, and loyal friend especially when things went wrong. I have never enjoyed more working closely over a long time with any colleague. He radiated a sense of fellowship, humour, and good fun which greatly helped enthusiastic co-operation amongst those who felt that they were struggling together for an important cause.

The Rt Rev. The Lord Bishop of Salisbury, George Reindorp, who is Chaplain of our College and wrote our College Grace, was an old friend; and when George and Maria Abercrombie's daughter Caroline was married in Southwark Cathedral he officiated as Provost of Southwark. His personal appreciation of George Abercrombie follows mine.

George Abercrombie leaves a widow, Maria, a son, Forbes, who is a surgeon in the Portsmouth Group, two married daughters, and nine grandchildren. The Royal College of General Practitioners will always remember him with great affection, and with gratitude for everything that he did for us during our first 10 years. We extend our sympathy to all his family.

LORD HUNT OF FAWLEY

MAY one who had the privilege of being a patient and friend of Dr G. Abercrombie ashore and afloat (1940-42) add a personal tribute? As Principal Medical Officer of HMS Birmingham, he won the respect and admiration of all on board. As a doctor, he treated everyone from the Captain to the youngest Boy Seaman with the same skill, compassion, humour, and total lack of sentimentality, as if he were dealing with a special patient in his private practice in Hampstead.

As a shipmate he might be playing chess with four officers or ratings simultaneously; acting as compère on a ship's radio programme; making a fourth at bridge; recounting a story with brilliantly dry humour; displaying his considerable skill on the dance floor; or contributing to a serious discussion in cabin or Ward Room. At all times we knew we could rely on him having the same attractive personality.

After the War, in London, my wife and children soon shared my affection and admiration for George. Later, as Chaplain of the Royal College of General Practitioners, I learned what a fine contribution he had made to its foundation.

There must be countless people as well as shipmates in two World Wars who are better off for having known him. As we offer our sympathy to Maria and his children, we are glad that after a long and quietly distinguished life he is in the haven where he would be.

+ GEORGE SARUM

*The Rt Rev. the Lord Bishop of Salisbury,
Chaplain of the Royal College of General Practitioners*