

THE INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE OF MEDICAL PRACTICE

Notes and Impressions

RICHARD SCOTT, M.D., D.P.H.

Edinburgh

The International College of Medical Practice was founded in Austria two years ago. It owes its origin, inspiration, and its achievements to date very largely to the initiative, energy, and vision of one man, namely DR ROBERT BRAUN, a general practitioner practising in a small rural community in Austria. This very new college, without traditions, with exceedingly slender financial resources, and with as yet a meagre membership, is still very much in a formative or speculative phase of its existence. Its constitution is very simple and devoid of rigidity and formality. It is not surprising, therefore, that the influence of individuals and of personalities is all important at this stage, and to convey any idea to general practitioners in the United Kingdom about the significance of this new college is almost synonymous with describing the philosophy, personality, and driving force of Robert Braun.

A few words on this remarkable man are therefore not inappropriate. Robert Braun is a graduate of the medical school of Vienna and a foundation associate of our College. He qualified in 1937 and has spent most of his working life as a rural general practitioner. He is a perpetual student, and reminds one of Osler's picture of the student physician; thus, Braun limits his practice to the extent that he is able to devote an average of three hours every day to reading and personal investigation. He reads and reviews regularly 27 medical publications, and I found him remarkably well informed about literature bearing on research in general practice not only in his own country, but also particularly the major studies in the field of medical care which have been published in the United Kingdom and North America. But Braun is not a library research worker, and his main interest lies in the practical problems of diagnosis and management with which he is confronted in his own practice. He has made extensive and original studies of morbidity in his own practice. He has devised and elaborated a number of new techniques describing and recording the clinical events as they occur in general practice,

and in fact most of his research endeavours are directed towards demonstrating the inadequacies of existing concepts of the nature of disease and the diagnostic labels we apply to clinical syndromes and pathological processes. He has combined these studies with a search for more adequate means of describing the clinical, psychological, social entities which bring the patient to his family doctor. Braun published his first major book on this subject in 1957. In this work Braun reviews and analyses the morbidity dealt with by him over a period of 11 years, working in three different types of practice, viz. rural, semi-urban, and industrial. He compares his results with studies published in other countries including the United Kingdom and North America. He concludes that when due allowance is made for the socio-economic circumstance of his patients, and the organization and availability of medical care in the country concerned, it can be shown that the family doctor in Austria has more in common with his colleagues in Sussex, Saskatchewan or Sutherlandshire than would at first sight seem possible. In many different countries general practitioners develop skills and insight, and pursue research interests which are exclusive or special to their chosen field of family medicine. Without international exchange at academic level this knowledge may die with them. National colleges of general practice help to keep alive this knowledge and pass it on to others. An international college helps the doctor to know that he has many colleagues in different countries grappling with the same problems, with whom he can profitably exchange ideas.

This brief biographical sketch, although inadequate, presents the salient features of the background from which the International College came into being. From his reading, from his voluminous correspondence, and from personal contact with the authors of researches in this broad field, Braun took the initiative in bringing together a number of general practitioners who had themselves made some contribution from their own studies in general practice.

The college thus came into being as a kind of fraternity or association of individuals active in research and general practice, and 30 doctors met in Vienna last year (1959) to read papers on their work, and to define and discuss new concepts arising from their studies. This was the first conference of the new college, and it was followed this year by a conference in Salzburg. The number of invited members in the meantime had increased to 60. All are in active general practice; they see patients directly without referral and without limiting the clinical or social nature of the problem which the patient may bring to them; but some of them, according to our concepts in the United Kingdom, could well be described as part-time specialists conducting more advanced work in a limited

field, such as in paediatrics, psychology, or obstetrics, along with their general work. The majority of the members are practising in Austria and West Germany, but the college counts in its membership individuals practising in East Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Australia, Canada and U.S.A. There are no statutory meetings other than the annual conference, and to this guest speakers may be invited. Any routine business is conducted by correspondence, the headquarters of the college being simply the house of the president then in office. There is a lay secretary who assists the president to keep in touch with members and issue a very simple and unpretentious news-sheet about four times a year. The rules for membership are simple but very interesting. Members must have been in active practice for at least four years, and before admission must present evidence of scientific work undertaken personally in the field of general practice. This scientific work need not necessarily have been published. It is left to the council of the college to decide whether the submitted evidence of research is adequate. The council consists of the president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer who are elected triannually by the general meeting. After admission to membership, a member must provide evidence within ten years that he has continued to do research in general practice, and if he fails to do so the council can and will terminate his membership. Membership is also terminated where the individual ceases to remain in active general practice. Associate-ship is open to all medical practitioners who do not qualify for ordinary membership.

Salzburg Conference

This conference was held in the magnificent setting of the municipal conference centre in Salzburg (Europa Haus). In a wonderfully appointed modern auditorium, simultaneous translation from German into English and English into German was provided during the scientific session. The conference lasted three days, and after an opening session at which we were welcomed by the civic dignitaries of the city, of the provincial government, and by the president of the Association of Physicians of Salzburg, greetings were received from the American Academy of General Practice, the College of General Practice of Canada, the Australian College, the German Academy of General Practice and the German Association of Country Practitioners. On this occasion I conveyed greetings from our own College. This was followed by the presentation of prizes for original work in general practice, for which 50 entries were received. The prizes were made possible by the gift of 1,000 dollars from the pharmaceutical firm of Lederle.

Papers were given by DR HERRLINGER of Munchsteinach, who

combines general practice with a chair in the history of medicine. Dr Herrlinger gave a fascinating account of the evolution of medical records in general practice with beautiful illustrations of diaries of country doctors dating back to the late 18th century. He discussed the impact of social insurance on the form of medical records and the influence of advances in medical treatment and diagnosis, and more recently the increase in research activity on the part of general practitioners as a stimulus to providing more adequate and more comprehensive medical records in general practice.

DR LACHNER of Vienna presented a paper on the changing patterns in morbidity emerging from an analysis of the results obtained by his colleagues in routine medical examinations of all apprentices in Vienna over a 10-year period.

DR ENGELMEIER of Oelde then read a paper on the clinical features of the acute abdomen from the point of view of the general practitioner and presented the results of a trial with special reference to a scheme of clinical history-taking which he had elaborated and tried out on a series of patients in his own practice.

I then read a paper based on a review of current trends in general practice with special reference to the technical problems of research and investigation.

The final paper of the first day was given by DR MEIER of Hanover who presented fascinating results from serial examinations of the feet of infants, toddlers, and school children. These were beautifully illustrated by a novel technique of photographic recording. Many of the patients had been followed up for eight or more years, and an interesting feature of the presentation was the large number of apparent abnormalities which had been corrected in this practice by very simple remedial exercises without reference to consultant orthopaedic intervention. Dr Meier's thesis was that in general practice it was possible to demonstrate that the range of normalcy was much greater than was taught to us as students by the anatomist, physiologist, and orthopaedic surgeon.

Other papers read dealt with pharmacology and the general practitioner, the technical problems of collecting case statistics in general practice, the diagnostic significance of anorexia as a symptom occurring in general practice, the incidence of psychiatric disorder in general practice, differential diagnosis of nose bleeding in general practice, and nosology in general practice. A Canadian representative described the traditional approach to group practice in Canada, and the final session consisted of a round table conference, with general practitioners and gynaecologists taking part, on the problems of early diagnosis of carcinoma of the cervix and its significance for

the general practitioner.

Finally one more prize was in the gift of the college; the ' Rottendorf Prize '. The original intention was that this prize should be awarded to the individual making the most original contribution at the scientific session of the conference. The committee decided not to award the prize in this form but rather to make a small contribution to the travelling expenses of all of the speakers, together with two volumes of the works of Mr Andreat J. Rottendorf—a distinguished German poet.

If I may add a personal note it is that my most vivid impression of this conference was of warm informality and friendliness on the part of my hosts. Although the papers in the scientific session were translated, language difficulties were enormous at the informal and social meetings and over meals; for example, I found myself talking in schoolboy French to a doctor from West Germany very many years my senior whose only means of communication was also a basic French even more limited than my own. In spite of this, however, I did get a very vivid impression of the sympathy and understanding of our common professional and academic ways of thinking. This new college is quite different from what I had expected it to be. It is a small and very informal body, by no means so adequately organized or so active as our own. They are, in fact, a series of individuals, and, while a number of them are interested in group investigations and the employment of statistical methods, by far the most outstanding characteristic is their desire to participate as individuals in their own researches in subjects of their own choice. It is quite a different set-up altogether from ours, but I think we have each much to give the other in maintaining liaison and exchange of ideas. The whole emphasis is really on individual research, and on the quite tough criteria that you cannot continue in this small and rather informal society unless you are personally and actively interested in carrying out your own investigations, and in keeping in touch with others who are working in different but related fields.
