

RESEARCH NEWS

RESEARCH IN GENERAL PRACTICE— ITS FEATURES, OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDS

On 22 May 1965, under the chairmanship of the Rt Hon. Lord Cohen of Birkenhead, the College held a conference on Research in General Practice—its Features, Opportunities and Needs, at 14 Princes Gate. The College Council is deeply indebted to Lord Cohen, not only for undertaking this task on the day but also for the advice, help and encouragement which he gave in the planning stages.

Research in general practice has reached the crossroads. In the early days following the inception of the College research was undertaken by a few people working as keen amateurs. These people paved the way and showed not only the need but the fact that it was possible to conduct research successfully in practice in various fields, e.g. operational, clinical and epidemiological. There is much to be investigated that can only be done in general practice. As research activity increased the difficulties due to the structure of general practice itself and the need for better training in research methods and more flexible methods of financial assistance came to the forefront. This conference was called to discuss the needs of the future and to bring them to the attention of other branches of the profession. The following attended: Sir Harry Jephcott, Professors E. M. Backett, W. J. H. Butterfield, J. D. N. Hill, S. L. Morrison, D. D. Reid, M. L. Rosenheim, J. G. Scadding, R. Scott, C. H. Stuart-Harris, M. Swann and R. E. Tunbridge, Major-General A. N. T. Meneces, Mr D. C. Bowie, Mr G. McLachlan, Mr S. A. Sklaroff, Drs Annis Gillie, J. A. D. Anderson, W. F. Anderson, S. J. Carne, C. O. Carter, D. L. Crombie, J. O. F. Davies, W. R. S. Doll, T. Eimerl, J. Faulkner, J. Fry, R. H. Griffiths, W. W. Holland, R. E. Hope-Simpson, E. V. Kuenssberg, J. M. Last, H. N. Levitt, K. Levy, R. F. L. Logan, R. J. F. H. Pinsent, B. C. S. Slater, R. Smith, F. H. Staines, J. E. Struthers, D. Thomson, G. I. Watson and C. A. H. Watts.

The first session was devoted to the evolution of research in general practice, the discussion being opened by DR R. J. F. H. PINSENT, MR S. A. SKLAROFF and PROFESSOR E. M. BACKETT. The special features of research in general practice were described and the opportunities afforded by the National Health Service system of registration emphasized. The role played by the College was discussed and the introductory paper and bibliography showed the very varied nature of the research already conducted by college members in the clinical field as well as in the operational. Mr Sklaroff had written a paper based on the evaluation of research in general practice which he recently undertook in conjunction with Dr J. A. D. Anderson and Dr John Fry at the invitation of the Research Committee of Council. He had studied a total of 473 papers published

from general practice since 1948, 348 of these papers being based on clinical or epidemiological research and 125 being connected with administration. The general impression gained from this first session seemed to be that with sufficient support the initial wave of enthusiasm in general practice research could be maintained.

The "Present Problems" was the title of the second session at which the discussion was introduced by DR E. V. KUENSSBERG and DR R. F. L. LOGAN. The methods of financial support for research in general practice were discussed at some length as were the difficulties due to lack of time and the general practitioner's continuing responsibility to his patients and partners. Emphasis was placed on the lack of formal training of the general practitioner in research methods. Although the basic research methods are the same as in any other field of medical research, the fact that general practitioners were frequently established principals before starting research work brought difficulties in the organization of formal training. The need to maintain the lead which the United Kingdom has already established in general practice research was noted.

In the third session "The Needs of the Future" formed the basis of the discussion which was introduced by DR D. L. CROMBIE and PROFESSOR R. E. TUNBRIDGE. In planning for the future it seems likely that four main questions have to be considered. What are the special opportunities for research in general practice? What are the tools and prior needs to enable this research to be conducted? How is support to be organized? What will be the cost and how is this to be met? These questions were all fully discussed. As in any lively worth-while discussion, varying views were aired. It was agreed, however, that there is a place for research in the field of general practice, that there should be more organization in training and planning for research and its conduct, that it should receive support from other fields of medicine and also in terms of finance. It was suggested that some of the difficulties in the organization of research in individual practices might be overcome if financial support were based on the research worker rather than on individual projects. It would be advantageous to have some central co-ordinating and advisory agency.

The last session was left for general discussion and was introduced by DR JOHN FRY, PROFESSOR M. SWANN and DR J. O. F. DAVIES. The need for research in general practice in various fields was again emphasized. Apart from other reasons, it could be justified on economic grounds. Whilst there is great scope for operational studies, some of which could be undertaken by departments of social medicine, the importance of research in clinical medicine in general practice was stressed. The natural history of many diseases still had to be studied and the continuing care of patients by general practitioners provided ideal opportunities.

The discussion was summed up by the RT HON. LORD COHEN of BIRKENHEAD who concluded "Action will come, of that we are certain, now that the College has explored the views of those who are present today".

It is hoped that a full report of the conference will appear later.