

Editorials

A NEW DEAL FOR GENERAL PRACTICE

IT HAS taken the Royal Commission on Medical Education* almost exactly three years to collect evidence, digest it and publish its report in a blue book of 400 pages. This by any beaurocratic standard must be near a record. The commission met 100 times, received written evidence from 400 and heard the views of more than 100 institutions and individuals: singly or in groups they travelled widely in this island and overseas. The report of a commission which has so thoroughly investigated its subject deserves most careful study. It appears at a time when the subject of medical education is receiving renewed attention from many organizations; the General Medical Council, the young and virile Association for the Study of Medical Education, the steering committees for the new medical schools at Nottingham and Southampton and our own college have all been active in this field. From the profession it will receive the study it deserves; the public whom it most concerns will soon forget it; the government who initiated it will find it has other things to do; to implement any part of the report will cost money, never popular with politicians unless the results are both visible and tangible.

This report suggests the most sweeping changes in the structure of medical education since the Medical Act of 1858. To say this is to imply that some at least of the recommendations could have been made with benefit many years ago. But education is the imparting of knowledge which will enable the student to take his place in the community with his equals. The teacher does not know, though he may guess, what the world will be like in five or ten years time. Progress (or should we say change?) is so rapid that it is impossible to plain for it in detail. The commission acknowledges this in using the delightfully Montaignean sub-title to its second chapter of "The importance of reaching a view into the future", and in this chapter we read of the first new requirement for all doctors: "Computers, with all their implications in terms of equipment, procedures and ways of thinking, will play too large a part in the work of all doctors in the future to be left entirely to the expert: every doctor should at least learn to understand their basic principles and potentialities."

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Gazing into the crystal ball, the commission sees the general practitioner in this country performing much the same role as he has in the past, perhaps in larger groups and more often working in health centres and taking over more of the work now fragmented between infant and school clinics and industrial medicine.

"A corollary to these changes will be the gradual weakening of the present distinction between 'specialist' and 'general practitioner' as generic categories in a rather hierarchal relationship, and its replacement by a broad structure of vocational specialties each with its own requirements of particular skills and proper training, and each carrying its proper share as a full partner in the system."

The doctor of the future, the commission considers "must, therefore, be educated not so much for the future as we now see it, but for a world in which everything—the content of medicine, the organization of medical care, the doctor's relationship with his colleagues and the community, and indeed every feature of his professional life and work—is on the more."

If the recommendations of the commission are accepted, the boy of the future looking to medicine as a career would be expected to spend five to six years at a university medical school taking a degree in medicine and perhaps also in medical science. After courses of study designed to qualify him as an 'educated man' he will pass to a graduate phase of a further five or six years before he can reasonably be expected to achieve consultant status in hospital practice or become a principal in general practice. The postgraduate phase is the most important part of the commission's recommendations and doubtless it is to stress this that it is considered before the undergraduate phase. The pre-registration period should be retained but be more strictly supervised than it has been in the past. This should be followed by three or more years in appointments so designed that the young doctor may at the end of this time still be able to choose what course his future will take. Training appointments during this time should not be limited to hospitals: "Many doctors will benefit from short appointments during this period as trainees in general practice, in research or in administrative posts." During this time the trainee will be given certificates, perhaps, annually, to the effect that he has been satisfactorily undertaking the duties and studies assigned to him. At the end of the three years the commission recommends that he should satisfy his professional college of his capability. It suggests that having acquired the necessary certificate might in itself be sufficient to admit him as a member of the college. In particular "On satisfactory completion of this general professional training signified by the award of a certificate based on progressive assessment of the trainee's performance, trainees would, we hope, be considered eligible for membership of The Royal College of General Practitioners." In substitution for the many diplomas at present existing in this country the commission recommends that a vocational register be maintained by the General Medical Council.

This report is of such importance that it must, and we are sure will be studied carefully by all the Royal Colleges and used as the basis on which to build for the future.

THE APOTHECARIES OF LONDON

THE publication of a short history of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London by Dr W. S. C. Copeman reminds us of the early days of the Royal College of General Practitioners when the foundation council met in the Hall of the Society. Dr Copeman, in his book, gives a lucid account of the development of the apothecary from the tradesman working in his shop to the fully-fledged general practitioner that we know today. Before 1617, when the Great Seal was affixed to their Charter, the apothecaries had been members of the Grocers' Company, dealers in spices and herbs. It was their growing importance as purveyors of medicines, potions, possets and boluses which made the break advisable, as King James remarked "Grocers are but merchants, the business of an Apothecary is a Mystery, wherefore I think it fitting, that they be a Corporation of themselves". As time passed the apothecaries took over more and more of the work of the physicians. This was forced upon them in a way by the high fees and arrogance of the physicians; the umbrage of the physicians was none the less for this. The apothecaries were still unable to charge for their advice or their attendance on patients but merely for the medicines which they provided. This state of affairs continued until a butcher, Steel, complained to the College of his treatment by an apothecary called William Rose. The College sued the apothecary, the case was taken to the House of Lords and there decided against them. Thereafter, until 1815, the apothecary was able to practise medicine, but was still unable to charge for his advice. The Apothecaries Act of 1815 established the Society of Apothecaries as the licensing body for general practitioners. Many have paid their tribute to the painstaking and thorough way in which the Society exercised its right. It must have been an onerous duty and we learn that every week the panel of 12 examiners met to license applicants. By then the society was charged with laying down standards of medical education and the time to be spent on what we would today call undergraduate study. In 1839, a written examination was instituted and the way was prepared for the Medical Act of 1858 when the General Medical Council took over the duty of licensing practitioners.

No building in London or indeed in the provinces could have been a more appropriate place for the foundation council of the College of General Practitioners to hammer out its constitution and its