

Editorial

A REVIEW OF THE WORK OF COLLEGE COUNCIL

AT the time when the College was founded in 1952, there was considerable doubt as to whether general practice would be able to survive in the framework of the young National Health Service. Those who formed the "Steering Committee" which decided the framework on which the College was built had no doubts and their optimism was vindicated when they first appealed for members. The first thousand was reached within a matter of weeks and the very success of the idea of a college—for at that time it was no more than an idea—made the work of the Foundation Council difficult. How well they succeeded may be gathered from a report presented to council on the 13 June last. Every corporate body is wise to sit back and look critically at itself from time to time. The council of 1969 appointed an Academic Review Working Party to revise the academic rôles and functions of the Royal College of General Practitioners and to make recommendations for its future. This was a wise remit. It was wise also to appoint to the working party younger members of council who would not be so familiar with the routine of college business as to be unable to discern when change was called for. The working party has done well to compress its report into twelve typewritten pages. Those who have worked for the College since its beginning may justly feel flattered that so little to criticise has been found.

Minor changes in the composition of council and its committees are suggested. The working party is convinced that the majority of members of council should be elected by the faculties but it feels that they should serve as faculty representatives for the maximum of five years and then, if they wish to continue to serve, they should offer themselves for election at the annual general meeting; the number of members thus elected should be increased from 12 to 15. To free council from day-to-day administration the working party suggests that more power should be given to the General Purposes Committee which would in effect become the executive committee of council. This would allow council to spend more time in policy formation and in debating important issues. At the same time the working party felt that council should make more use of small committees and working parties for specific purposes and that there should be directly responsible to council. Here the working party is on less secure ground. Council and its committees are already served by numerous working parties—some of whom report and, indeed, do valiant work. Others find their reports soon forgotten, some again fail to reach the maturity of a report. The wisdom of council setting up numerous small committees of any kind is doubtful; those which are necessary should report to the standing committees in whose remit the subject matter rests. The standing committees of council are and must remain the forward-looking policy-makers on the subjects in which they are empowered to act. When a standing committee makes a recommendation to council it has already been given searching consideration and council should have sufficient faith in the committees it has elected to hesitate before turning down a recommendation from such a committee. It might be wise for council to refrain from disturbing a committee recommendation except by a majority vote of two thirds of its members.

One point of overlap in the functions of the standing committees of council lies in the work of the Practice Organization Committee. We doubt, as also did council

when it debated the report, the wisdom of the suggestion of the working party to dissolve this committee at this stage in the evolution of general practice. Although some of its investigatory functions could be taken over by the Research Committee and some of its educational functions by the Education Committee there is still much to be done. The purpose of the College, and therefore of its standing committees, is surely to ensure that good general practice develops along proper lines, to study and to initiate progress. Good general practice depends so much on proper organization—on incorporating the new techniques which are being developed in hospitals and other professional establishments and in business houses, so as to bring to the sick and ailing the best possible service. It cannot yet be argued that the Practice Organization Committee has so far progressed that it can hand over its remit to others who are already deeply engaged in exploring new developments in research and education.

The views of the faculties had been sought by the working party and faculty secretaries had replied to a questionnaire designed to ascertain these, and in this way the opinions of 24 of the 27 home faculties were obtained. The summary of these provides an up-to-date account of the state of the faculties and therefore of the college membership at home. The number of projects completed and in progress in the faculties was impressive. Although there was great variation in the way they carried out their business it emerged that they were all in a healthy state. Their major criticism was of lack of communication between the centre and the periphery. This is an age-long complaint of all large and progressive organizations for which it is hard to find a solution. Communication is a two-way traffic. The faculty members of council have a clear duty to report the views of those they represent and to take back to the faculty board reports of the activities of council. In this matter of communication the *Journal* has its part. Within the limits of space the pages of the *Journal* have always been at the disposal of the chairmen of council and its committees and of the secretaries of faculties. The editor is aware of the difficulties in preparing and submitting news quickly and in an endeavour to get this on time a reminder goes to all 'departmental heads' in the College each month. It is not possible to remind faculty secretaries at the same time, but they can always submit material to the editor. A suggestion by the faculties that members of council should pay more frequent visits to faculties was debated by council and it was pointed out that these visits could only be made at the request of the faculty. No council member said that such visits would be unwelcome.

The report of this academic review working party was considered at some length and eventually referred to the committees of council who will submit their observations to the working party who in their turn have been asked to incorporate these observations in a fresh report. How the members of the working party may feel about this was not said. It was evident that if the working party accepts the criticisms which will be made, quite a different report will emerge; Nevertheless the members of the working party must be congratulated on having produced a document well worthy of consideration, out of which it is certain that some reforms will come. The College has played its part in bringing about many of the changes which have already occurred in general practice. The council of the College must be ever aware that it must itself move with the times.
