

## THE PRESIDENCY, 1972-73

**WE** are honoured to be able to announce that His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, has graciously consented to accept the office of president of the Royal College of General Practitioners during its twenty-first anniversary year, November 1972 to November 1973 and thereafter to become patron of the College.

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### *Editorial*

DOCTOR J. S. COLLINGS

**F**OR most general practitioners the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948 was an unwelcome imposition on their freedom of action and the resultant mood was one of despondency. There were doctors who over the preceding years had instilled into their daily routine all that was best and capable of adoption into domiciliary practice; these were disheartened by the feeling that they were being sized down to fit into the machine. There were also others, of whom less was known, whose method of practice had not changed for many years. These—sometimes known as the sixpenny doctors—working in the poorer areas were giving service which, although unsatisfactory by the standards of the day, was welcomed by those who could afford no better. This type of practice was the one who stood most to benefit by the new regime. Only two years had elapsed after the implementation of this new Act when a young Australian came to Britain with a Nuffield research grant to study general practice. His report,<sup>1</sup> published at length in *The Lancet*, caused considerable stir. Read with an unbiased mind what he revealed was fair enough. He found good practices as well as bad, but as usual when a report reveals any situation which could be construed as scandalous, it was the bad which caught the eye of the press. Much embarrassment was caused. Many doctors who still believed in the future of general practice were furious; some, more far seeing than others, sought ways of remedying the situation. It was these who were attracted to the project to form a college or academic institute of general practice to save it from the inertia which threatened. Thus it is that the report of Dr J. S. Collings was an important stimulus to the foundation of our college. Many were surprised that the editor of *The Lancet* should have given so much space in his journal to this report. To accept it showed great courage and a perception of the needs of the moment. The following appreciation by Sir Theodore Fox of Dr Collings who died on the 6th of February this year at the age of 52 is therefore of particular interest:

“From the 1920’s onwards, we had many penetrating reports on medical care; but none really disturbed the general assumption that British Medicine was the best in the world and that general practice was its backbone. When in 1950 Collings showed that this backbone was steadily shortening, softening, and weakening, he did a service none

but a stranger could have performed. And a stranger with unusual qualifications and ability.

“A quiet, soft-spoken young man, reserved but friendly, he did not come intending to expose the shortcomings in our general practice but merely to describe it—comparing it with what he had seen in his own Australia, in New Zealand, and in the United States. With local advice, he took immense trouble to select representative English practices, in town and country and in different regions; and, though his sample was afterwards criticized as biased and too small, he did in fact ‘sit in on’ the work of 55 practices, spending one to five days in each.

“Where, as so often, he was welcomed as a colleague, it must have been painful for the doctors afterwards to see their practice criticized, however justly. But though he recorded many defects in medical care, Collings was looking at them not as personal failures but as symptoms of an ‘illness’ of general practice. Under the conditions of the time, especially in cities, even the best doctor could quickly deteriorate and the idealistic ‘missionary’ could soon be less useful to his patients than a ‘mercenary’ who was better at snap diagnosis.

“The reason why Colling’s report was outstanding, and could not be ignored was that this young man had a remarkable talent for analysis and exposition. To medicine he brought the detachment of one who came of a political family and had previously graduated in another subject (agriculture). But, above all, he had determination and an intense desire to reach the truth. Under his gentle, modest manner were fires that could not be quenched by difficulties or disapproval; and, when he, was in England, they threw light where light was needed.”

Dr Collings returned to Australia in 1954 and set up a group practice in Melbourne in which he attempted to incorporate all the features on which he had been preaching in the preceding years. The Clark-Hiskens Medical Centre, as it was called, was an outstanding success but it had to be closed in 1961 for financial reasons; Collings had attempted to finance all the ancillary help from private fees. In the meantime he had been appointed part-time director of the department of physical medicine at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and he held this post until he retired in 1970 on account of ill-health. He continued to go to his rooms to attend to practice matters up to the day before he died.

#### REFERENCE

1. Collings, J. S. (1950). *Lancet*, 1, 555–585.
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