

R. M. S. McCONAGHEY

Si monumentum requiris, circumspice

“WITHOUT Mac there would have been no *Journal*.” These were the words used by Dame Annis Gillie when she presented the Council’s gift of silver candelabra at the 1971 council dinner.

R. M. S. McConaghey, universally known within the College as “Mac”, was a member of the Foundation Council and the first college research committee. It was from this committee, chaired by R. J. F. H. Pinsent and one of the first committees of the new College to produce results (Murray Scott, 1970) that the embryo *Journal* sprang.

The early years

In order to meet object E of the Memorandum of Association of the College, “to encourage the publication by general medical practitioners of original work on medical and scientific subjects concerned with general practice,” Pinsent produced the first communication which was *The Research Newsletter of the College of General Practitioners*. It appeared in September, 1953 and was confidential to the research members. The fourth issue was shared between Pinsent and McConaghey and the issue of November, 1954 was the first for which McConaghey was solely responsible.

He accepted the office “with trepidation”, since he had had “no previous experience of editing, little of writing, a complete ignorance of the niceties of punctuation, and an inherent inability to spell”. In all, he felt “singularly ill-equipped for the job”.

The first editorial board McConaghey created from within the research committee, and indeed G. F. Abercrombie, D. G. French, J. H. Hunt, R. J. F. H. Pinsent and G. I. Watson all continued as members for many years; several serve on the new editorial board today. The early issues of the *Journal* have been carefully preserved in the college library and can be seen on application to the librarian.

The middle years

During the following years the *Journal* made steady progress. One of McConaghey’s first steps was to expand the circulation. He campaigned to delete the “not for publication” mark, and the research newsletter was soon sent to every member of the new College instead of to the research group only. No sooner was this achieved than the next logical step was taken of seeking to distribute the issues outside the College. This occurred in 1958 when the title changed to *Journal of the College of General Practitioners and Research Newsletter*.

Step by step the format changed. In 1960 the pages were first sewn together and a spine created on which the title also appeared. Simultaneously the words “and research newsletter” were dropped so that the title became the *Journal of the College of General Practitioners*. In 1962 the new college crest was incorporated and the appearance of the *Journal* considerably improved. Every facet of the publication came under scrutiny and in 1964 McConaghey decided that the quality and quantity of the material he was receiving justified an increase in the frequency of publication. He moved up from

quarterly to bi-monthly, without any substantial increase in his editorial board, or in his staff who virtually consisted of the hard-working Miss Scawn.

The "Royal" prefix came in 1967 producing the present title, the same year the page size was enlarged, the present blue cover adopted, and the major step taken of starting monthly publication.

It is easy in listing this catalogue of successes to forget the problems, the costs in time and worry, that each improvement required. There were certainly times when pressures on the all important advertising revenue, rises in postal costs, and difficulties in organisation threatened the very existence of the *Journal*. That each successive crisis was overcome is a tribute to the calm and the persistence that are such obvious features of McConaghey's personality. The tolerance and devotion of his wife must never be forgotten.

The later years

In the later years there were a number of difficulties and disappointments; criticisms arose for the first time. McConaghey moved meticulously to meet them. New, younger members were recruited to the editorial board; a questionnaire was distributed to the whole membership seeking guidance; and the request was underlined in a main editorial². No clear consensus for change emerged, but review articles were suggested and soon incorporated. McConaghey acquiesced in major changes in the *Journal* office and the method of publication.

Assessment

It is well known that journals closely reflect the skills and personalities of their editors. This *Journal* is no exception and it would be surprising if in 17 years McConaghey had not stamped on his own creation his own characteristics. Seventeen years is a considerable period of editorial direction and although not a record in time, it certainly is in terms of achievement. He has the rare satisfaction of having achieved within his lifetime a complete realization of his earlier ambitions. In the words of Pinsent, he has transformed "an ideal into an international institution". He had from the start, a clear idea of the kind of journal that the College ought to have. His aim was to create a scholarly, erudite, scientific medical journal, written predominantly by general practitioners, edited by a general practitioner, and designed for general practitioners throughout the world.

One measure of his achievement is the change that has occurred in the presentation, content and quality of general practitioner papers. In the early days they were submitted on varying sizes of paper, hand-written on both sides of flimsy paper and it was a major task to decipher them. In those days, such articles had to be typed before the Editor could take a decision and often retyped after corrections and amendments. References were often omitted and one of the Editor's little known roles was to insert and list the references from his own extensive library; spending hours on this task. In those days, few general practitioners wrote papers and the editorial board, all of whom held their doctorates, exercised an enormous educational influence in raising the standard of others to their own.

Another measure of his achievement is the impact on other medical journals. *The Journal of the Royal College of Physicians*, although the organ of a body several hundred years older than that of the Royal College of General Practitioners, came into being only after McConaghey had shown what a college journal could do. Similarly, the impact on the *British Medical Journal* has been considerable, parts of this are now indistinguishable from parts of this *Journal*. The same topics are covered, often by the same authors, as can be seen from the numerous cross references. When McConaghey came to the editorial chair, general practitioner papers were rare; today they are common.



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Honorary Editor: 1954-1971

The great achievement of the College has been to bring together like-minded general practitioners. Since its members catalyse each other's thoughts, their total effect becomes greater than the sum of their individual efforts. This catalytic action is only possible if the members have a method of communicating with each other. One method is to meet and talk; the other is to write and record, especially in the College's own *Journal*. This is the only way of reaching the whole membership and is, moreover, permanent.

Some men are privileged to leave tangible evidence of their work which speaks for itself—*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. This is so with McConaghey and the College has already honoured him with the first George Abercrombie Award. The citation stated that this was awarded for his outstanding service to the literature of general practice, and especially for his work with the *Journal*.

We believe that the achievement of the founding fathers of the College has not yet been fully recognised. We believe that when full appreciation has been made, it will be found that one of their great contributions to general practice will have been to place responsibility for the *Journal*, at that critical time, in the hands of Richard Maurice Sotheron McConaghey.

REFERENCES

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OUT OF DEBT

THE College debt is cleared. For the first time since the foundation of the College the borrowings from bank and appeal fund have been eliminated. This was the highlight of the honorary treasurer's report, when the accounts for the year were presented to the 1971 Annual General Meeting.

History of the debt

The College needed money when it was first formed and it was inevitable that debts were incurred to pay for the rapidly expanding activities. Later, an appeal fund was launched which was generously supported both from industry and the medical profession. It is frightening to consider what might have happened without that support.

Over the years, the debt gradually grew and the College faced a rising overdraft. In 1963, some members expressed concern. The Council members, who are the equivalent of directors, considered the matter and, mindful of their responsibility to the membership, who are equivalent to the shareholders of a company, sought the advice of the College's consultant accountants, Messrs Cooper Brothers. This investigation led to a most helpful report. The main recommendation which has been implemented was that the College should have a separate finance committee, independent of any other committee of Council. The broad conclusion was simple; the College was spending more than it could afford. At its height the debt reached £84,000.

Reduction of the debt

In 1965 Council decided to adopt a policy of containing expenditure while simultaneously seeking to increase income. This was the plan advocated by Dr Stuart Carne who was appointed second honorary treasurer in 1964. Since the subscriptions produced