

## **Organising a Section 63 course**

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### **Section 63**

THE words 'Section 63' drop lightly from the lips of those discussing general practitioner postgraduate education and occur liberally in the voluminous stencilled and printed literature on the subject. Section 63 of the Health Services and Public Health Act, 1968, consists of eight paragraphs and 15 sub-paragraphs. Essentially, it provides "for persons of such class as may be specified in regulations made by the Minister with the approval of the Treasury, such instruction as appears to him conducive to securing efficiency" and for a general practitioner "in such activity involved or connected with the provision of services under part four of the 1946 Act". The Treasury pays for these courses and for general practice this covers any aspect of the terms of service including many non-clinical subjects. Treasury safeguards may be irksome to general practitioners who are used to the freedom of the independent contractor status. It is mandatory to obtain permission in advance and follow the correct channels. Two examples show why this is necessary.

A doctor, after a casual conversation, arranged for a distinguished lecturer to fly from Dublin to speak at a postgraduate centre. The meeting was a great success, the expenses included air fares for the lecturer and his wife, two nights at a hotel, and a small dinner party for six people arranged before the lecture. Unfortunately, the Treasury grant for such a lecture, including fees and expenses, was less than £10 and the money had to be found by economising on other activities.

An enthusiast who organised a course on mental deficiency in general practice, assembled a team of six lecturers of great repute but found that they were lecturing to an audience of only five. Although the grant for a day's course like this can be as much as £60, it would have been almost as economical for each of the five attenders to have been given a book on mental deficiency worth £10.

### *Learning the procedure*

Those who have been in the Services will know the importance of reading the regulations, and the first step in running a Section 63 course is to read several times the 14 page small booklet entitled *Memorandum on continuing education for general practitioners* (1971).<sup>1</sup> This is well written and can be read quickly. It is important to use the most recent edition which has a yellow cover. The Secretary of State has delegated his responsibility in London to the British Postgraduate Medical Federation which operates for the conglomerate of teaching hospitals and for the metropolitan regional boards, and outside London to postgraduate deans in the regions.

Being briefed with the memorandum, the next step is to win the confidence of your postgraduate dean. In most faculties this should already have been done before by some other general practitioner, and it is well worthwhile at this stage having a quiet telephone call or chat over a beer to find out what your particular dean requires and how he organises his administration. Does he pay for postage, or do you and reclaim? Does he like all mailing to executive councils to go through his office, or are you allowed to deal direct? Many deans are particularly anxious that general practitioners should organise courses on subjects such as practice organisation or family planning. These are not normally within the usual field of interest of the university clinical tutors at postgraduate centres.

*Preparing a programme*

Long before one writes to the lecturers, decide on a programme. Discussion with those who have made mistakes in the past can be most valuable. The timing of coffee and meal breaks, with adequate allowance of time for discussion, gives that pleasant feeling one gets when one goes to the theatre to enjoy a well balanced revue whose items seem to follow in an entertaining order and create the holistic impression which doctors take away from the course. A course in which the audience feels involved, relaxed and entertained will be far more effective than a sterile reading of erudite papers without time for questions, where one has sat on the same chair for three hours, where the food was awful, and the organisation conspicuously absent. As in pantomime, audience participation when skilfully arranged, is highly popular, so allow plenty of time for debate, questions, brains trusts and panel discussions and the more controversy the better.

After the dean's approval of the programme in outline, the next step is selecting a day, date and time. Local past experience is invaluable, as is audience research, not among the keenest of your friends, who will invariably attend, but among those floating voters who may or may not, depending on the lure of the programme.

**Planning in advance**

The more experienced the course organiser, the more he plans ahead. Unless it is a very simple meeting, it is wisest to regard the gestation of a course as being equal to the antenatal period, i.e. at least nine months ahead. Time can be saved with experience, but it certainly causes wear and tear on the coronary arteries! When writing to your speakers, send them a copy of the day's programme with titles, but it is tactful not to list the names of speakers so that they do not necessarily realise those who refused to speak, or are second choices, when the final programme is available. Brief your speakers with directions as clearly as possible. Show your draft letter to a friend who does not know your brain child, and see if, when it is read through quickly, he can pick out your salient points. Tell the speakers the date, the exact length of time they are to speak, the topics you hope they will cover and the size and composition of the audience. Regular speakers soon learn which courses will be efficient and can anticipate those which are going to have some catastrophe in the middle, such as "the coffee has not been ordered, so that there will be no mid-morning refreshment", or "unfortunately, we have used up all the discussion time."

*Imagining the day in advance*

At the same time as writing to the lecturers, visit the site of the meeting. Start with the car park, work through the day in your imagination, picturing 60 or 70 people rushing through certain doors at 09.30 hours thirsting for knowledge, and all trying to sign simultaneously on one sheet of paper their executive council number—which, of course, they have forgotten.

Discuss with those who have previously run courses at that postgraduate centre the snags of that particular building; and after obtaining permission from the university clinical tutor to use the postgraduate centre, his hard won experience must be assimilated. Many of the practical details are best learned from that faithful maid of all works, the postgraduate secretary. She sits in her office and has had the work of getting the signatures, while the tutor may only be rounding up his V.I.P.s. Check at the postgraduate centre to see that on the day selected, refreshment will be available and audio-visual aids working.

You or a close friend must know in advance how to work the projector (if a projectionist is not provided) as nothing ruins a day as much as 60 impatient doctors sitting while a red faced organiser tries, for the first time with a strange machine, to get the slide

the right way up. Sophisticated equipment may only be lent to those operators who have passed a test. Some centres and universities, after past bitter experience, impose a test before lending their most expensive equipment. Good organisers should always have one or two tame projectionists up their sleeve, and if they have not, volunteers should be trained.

### *Time-table*

There are two other invaluable aids, a large count down time-table and a budget. On the time-table write the date of the course and, counting backwards, list the last realistic date to take each step. This will include the date to give the caterers firm numbers and the date to write to the lecturers. These letters should be sent about a month in advance, with the final programme, and the addresses of the other lecturers with whom they can co-ordinate their papers if they wish, but again stress their time allowance. Your time-table must show the date on which you, the postgraduate dean, or executive council send the advertisements to the general practitioners and the other tasks necessary, otherwise you will find you should have done something last week.

### **The budget**

Finally, the budget. For the occasional evening meeting, where coffee is relatively cheap, there is no problem, providing one has established with the university how much they will pay in expenses and have an understanding with them that they will meet the lecturers' fees and agreed expenses direct. There are few overheads, as most postgraduate centres do not charge for this use of the building, and the projectionist is usually a colleague who has 'volunteered'.

However, at a full-day symposium with coffee, tea, sherry and a midday meal, often arranged by the catering officer, money troubles arise. New overheads to a whole-day meeting arise. Lapel badges giving name and town of origin are worthwhile. I always use these supplied direct in bulk by the Haig poppy fund<sup>2</sup>, which is an excellent cause, and cheaper than the local stationer: some courses even have the names dymotaped in different colours, for doctors, nurses, health visitors. Many attenders enjoy having a handout, because, rather like children going away from the party, emerging from a conference clutching a sheet of paper giving the references and the major points of the best papers, considerably enhances the afterglow of the meeting. Projectionists, typing, printing and guest meals, all increase costs.

The sad fact is that if one is levying a charge of £2 for incidental expenses for attending the meeting and that if 100 doctors are expected, usually only 70 eventually arrive. The 70 who attend will subsidize the 30 who did not and for whom meals were ordered, paid and left. There are some doctors known to all organisers who are notorious for applying for every course going. One Birmingham practitioner put his name down for five courses on the same Saturday afternoon, not knowing that there was a certain amount of co-ordination at the university offices; he surpassed himself on this occasion as he went to none of them! The secret of success is to get the money with the applications. The people who fail to arrive without apologies, having sent their money, can be counted on the fingers of one hand; they rarely ask for their money back, and even more rarely get it from me.

Charge a reasonable fee because expenses are claimable, and why should doctors expect free coffee and meals? To the occasional complaint, I say that my solicitor paid £60 for a two day legal course, with no expenses given and no seniority award as inducement. Also ask on the application for the executive council prescription pad number and the executive council area to enter on the attendance form in advance; then only signatures are needed on the day. Make sure that you establish that the applicant is an eligible principal in general practice and not a temporary assistant, or someone who

does an occasional surgery, for whom you will get no credit from the Department of Health. Recognised assistants, regular locums, and, for organisational courses, ancillary help may attend in special circumstances and claim expenses if satisfying certain criteria. Similarly, trainee practitioners and those training to return to practice can be eligible, but check with your dean's office.

#### *Sponsored courses*

Sometimes tempting advice is proffered, rather like the free apple in the garden of Eden, that perhaps it should be subsidised by a drug firm. Although this is possible in exceptional circumstances it is difficult and should be left to only the most experienced operators. The reason is, unfortunately, that drug firms exist to manufacture and publicise their own products and it takes a very high degree of altruism before hidden persuasion disappears. Notable exceptions to these forces do occur, such as the Geigy symposia, whose professional organiser, Mr Ruff, is probably the most experienced in this whole field.

Postgraduate deans are unable to approve programmes under Section 63 where financial support from commercial interests is involved except where this support is confined to the provision of light refreshments or the printing of a programme. In no circumstances must the promotion of a particular product be involved, or a film shown with any reference to any proprietary products. All courses fully approved under Section 63 usually cover the payment of fees to lecturers and travelling expenses to attenders, so charges levied must be for incidental expenses and refreshments only.

Costs are rising. The accounts are not audited although all organisers should be prepared to explain all if necessary. In charging a fee for incidental expenses, it is always wisest to err on the generous side as any surplus can go into local faculty or postgraduate funds. If many speakers are needed, as happens at some meetings, the Dean may be hard pressed to provide a satisfactory fee for each and unexpected overheads arise.

#### *Other courses*

Other courses which cannot be approved by postgraduate deans under Section 63 may be recognised by the Department of Health and Social Security for seniority award and postgraduate training allowance but not covering expenses or fees. These may include some of the commercially sponsored non-advertising symposia, and some meetings such as those organised by the British Medical Association in Cyprus and Malta, or Proman in the USA, where obviously travelling expenses would not be met, nor lecturers' fees paid, but where those attending may get some credit for postgraduate education.

#### *Advertising the course*

Circulate the advertised programme well in advance to allow doctors to arrange their off duty rotas. If necessary, do not be afraid to recirculate later if the numbers are not enough. It must be clearly stated, in bold print, to whom cheques are payable, and the address for the application, particularly if it is different from the place where the meeting is going to be held. It is helpful for last minute snags if the course organiser gives his name with surgery and home addresses. If you give all your telephone numbers, it is worth stating the time of day (or night!) where appropriate. Tell the accepted attenders when they will receive their final details. At the same time as the speakers are preparing their papers, and the applicants are watering at the mouth at the prospect of the course before them, the harassed organiser should be assembling together notices for the car park and the lecture theatre, rechecking the final details about the projectionist, the catering, arranging to meet the speakers from the railway station, registration, and all the mundane details which are taken for granted if they go smoothly, but which are all too obvious when things go wrong.

### Final details

About ten days before the course begins, if possible, send to those attending final details which include a map of the approaches and, if necessary, of the buildings, a final programme, lapel badges and the appropriate claim form for expenses. Make sure that they realize that this form (different for principals, trainees and assistants) is to be sent to the executive council and not to you.

Two or three days beforehand the organiser should brief the chairman in depth, and make sure that he has, on some cards for his pocket, written out the exact announcement that the organiser wishes to have made at the precise time in the meeting, as well as those revealing intimate details about the speakers which he will not know from personal experience. At some courses, when it comes to a break for lunch, a fascinating debate takes place in public about whether lunch has been provided, or if so for whom, and whether it is possible to approach it by car or a lengthy trek. One experienced chairman said on these occasions he regarded himself as a guided missile being controlled by his course organiser as from mission control.

When the great day dawns, ensure that the organiser has nothing to do theoretically because in practice it is his task to deal with the snags; during registration someone may arrive claiming he sent his money, someone else is quite sure the university told him he could bring a friend, and often people attend the wrong course by mistake. Notices collapse, speakers telephone to say their windscreen has blown out on the motorway, and occasionally, allies who have dined too well the night before, no longer appear fit enough to support the harassed organiser. Some charming backwoodsman will begin a long debate on how many sessions he has yet to attend, can he claim expenses travelling from Scotland, or was last week's film show Section 63? An organiser well in control will delicately and speedily refer him to the executive council for his personal tally queries, or to the dean for questions of previous course eligibility.

A supply of minor items such as felt tipped pens, spare drawing pins, chalk, 'Sello-tape', spare bulbs for the projector, paper tissues and coins for the telephone can be useful, and several times even the humble aspirin has been in great demand. At the end of the day it is as well to make sure that someone will make a 'spontaneous' vote of thanks to the chairman, who will already have been briefed about thanking the postgraduate tutor, the postgraduate secretary, and the catering officer in addition to the stars who have appeared.

### *Afterwards*

At the finish, when all is over, like the captain of a sinking ship, the organiser should be the last to leave, as it is his neck which will be in the noose if lights are left on, cigarette stubs are discovered in a room labelled 'no smoking', or if the domestic supervisor complains to the postgraduate tutor about the mess that was left behind. Finally, speakers should quickly each receive an individual letter of thanks, mentioning that once the wheels of the university treasurer's department turn they will receive their fee. Letters to the postgraduate tutor, secretary, and catering officer greatly help next year's organiser.

A list of speakers with addresses and expenses must be sent off, without delay, to the postgraduate dean; this means that the organiser must have tackled the lecturers and others regarding submitting expenses which should, if possible, be agreed beforehand; occasionally a taxi fare from London to Oxbridge will shatter the budget and be difficult to refute. It may come as a surprise that a paid locum was necessary on a Sunday morning and even more that this costs £20 in Camford. The attendance sheet, or a good photocopy must also go without delay to the dean's office.

Before thoughts of 'never again' become firmly entrenched it is charitable before

closing the file, which will have accumulated alarmingly, to head it with a single sheet of paper, written while the memory is still red hot, of those things that went wrong, and how the next person can do better.

If this advice seems full of gloom and despondency, like reading the divorce columns when contemplating marriage, it is only to save new recruits to course organising making as many mistakes as I have done.

Although this article was commissioned to remove from college tutors the alibi that they have not organised a course because they did not know how, course organisation is not a closed shop. A college tutor without a course to his name may have some talking to do at the next tutors' conference on 14 September, 1972, but if you are a general practitioner with an interest in viruses—radio control—the coil—or any field of interest, do not be afraid of starting.

Given enthusiasm, the ability never to take no for an answer, shrewd knowledge of human nature, and the ability to motivate others, dedication to general practice postgraduate education and loyal support, nothing is impossible. Judging by those masochists who undertake this task regularly it clearly has its rewards; no-one should be deterred from trying.

### Summary

The ten commandments are:

1. Obtain, read well, and memorize the memorandum *Continuing Education for General Medical Practitioners*.<sup>1</sup>
2. Find out from the local postgraduate dean what he wishes, as well as what your medical colleagues really want.
3. Discuss the programme and arrangements in advance, both with some of the potential audience and with some of those with previous course organisation experience.
4. Plan well in advance the budget and the countdown time-table.
5. Brief speakers fully when writing to them; repeat this a month before, and when sending final details stress the timing.
6. Visit the course venue in advance to discuss local rules and try to simulate the potential snags that might arise.
7. Circulate a wide enough audience well in advance with adequate details. Ensure that on the application form you obtain the information you require as well as a request for money.
8. Send a map with your final details and programme, and if possible send the name badges and the claim forms to reduce work on the day.
9. On the day, prepare for the worst; it may happen.
10. After all is over, including the thank-you letters, the attendance register, and the names of the speakers have gone to the university, write down on one sheet of paper, all the mistakes you would not like to see your successor repeat on the next occasion. (He or she probably will).

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### REFERENCES

1. *Memorandum on Continuing Education for General Practitioners* (1971). Available from: The Department of Health and Social Security, Division E.C. (C), Eileen House, 80-94 Newington Causeway, London, SE1 or The Welsh Office (CH SW 1A) Cothays, Park, Cardiff CF1 3WQ.
  2. The Haig Poppy Fund, British Legion Poppy Factory Ltd., Petersham Road, Richmond, Surrey.
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