

part-time Postgraduate Advisers in general practice to work with Postgraduate Deans, and others are carrying out the work in a voluntary capacity.

Adviser is possibly a misnomer, as much of the work should be executive in implementing advice given by regional general practice subcommittees and college tutors. There is also a need to support the efforts of college tutors and teachers of general practice, to liaise closely with medical schools and the staffing departments of regional hospital boards, or their successors. Nevertheless advice must be given, and is perhaps most important in the field of career guidance to young graduates, and in helping to formulate the overall policy of postgraduate deans' departments.

Those who have already been appointed to these posts have all been experienced general practitioners who have, over the years, been helping to develop the College's policies, and they all remain part-time in active practice. This continuing contact with every day practice seems to be vital to the success of the appointment, though it does present problems in the organisation of a partnership, though perhaps no greater than those caused by doctors who do several clinical assistant sessions. In future experienced college tutors and general practice teachers should provide a strong source of excellent regional advisers, and it seems that those appointed will take an important part in developing and maintaining standards of postgraduate education.

One word of warning—those who are appointed Postgraduate Advisers in general practice must never allow themselves to become remote dictatorial administrators. The value of the advice that is given will depend on the ability to heed the advice given by their colleagues—the teachers, the college tutors, the consultants and, most important, the aspirants to general practice—with whom they will have to work.

HAIR, HEALTH AND HISTORY

ARCHAEOLOGISTS are not only interested in man's past deeds, but also in the remains of man himself which have been preserved by chance, or even by intent. A study of both can reveal much about people in the past, how they lived, and how their way of life was influenced by food, drink, homes and customs. New methods of analysis enable quantitative studies of some substances in animal tissue to be estimated, almost to the nearest molecule, and as each new technology appears a new look can be taken at sources of material for study.

Nowadays the nutrition of developed countries is based on the harvesting of all the continents and so our composition may reflect some characteristics of the Canadian prairie, the Tasmanian orchard or the New Zealand sheepfarm. Produce of Danish dairies and Israeli orangeries dilute and alter the proportions of the trace substances we ingest from home-grown produce, whether grown in our own gardens or in the nursery a mile up the road.

The open field system of agriculture of the Middle Ages meant that villages literally lived off their own land, sending their surplus to the nearest town; townspeople too were partakers of their near rather than their distant environment. The passing of the Enclosure Acts may well have altered local patterns of distribution, but to this day some counties remain self-supporting in greenstuffs, sending the surplus to Covent Garden or elsewhere.

Many of the substances which the new techniques can measure with uncanny accuracy are excreted in skin, nails, bone and hair, the latter providing a slow but nevertheless effective way of eliminating some of the less useful elements from the body.

Forensic scientists have known this for years, but to their ability to test for arsenic has now been added the capability of measuring a wide range of other elements in trace quantities. Neutron activation analysis can produce a profile of the content of a single hair for mercury, copper, zinc, chromium, tin and many more elements besides. Gold is found in greater amounts in women's hair. This is not thought to be related to their intrinsic virtue but to the presence of gold as a contaminating impurity in hairsprays. Modern methods can now discriminate between surface contamination and trace substances within the hair itself and baselines for hair from contemporary heads can be established.

To obtain a picture of the trace element content of mankind in the days before there was such mobility of foodstuffs, specimens of hair which have survived the ravages of time are essential material. To be of greatest value, the hair should be accurately dateable as were the many specimens from the head of Napoleon Bonaparte. Hairs from the scalp of Robert Burns have recently been examined for their mercury content. The medical history of the famous is usually well documented and often there is further evidence to indicate medicaments that the subject might have received during life. What is now required to establish baselines for such elements as mercury and arsenic (as a guide to the assessment of present-day hazards) is a large number of hair samples from previous centuries. The sample can be quite small, a lock of hair no longer than a matchstick and half as thick. Ideally, each sample should be labelled with the age and sex of the individual and the approximate date when the sample was taken.

General practitioners, particularly those with an antiquarian turn of mind may have, either directly or through contacts, opportunities to obtain samples of hair which fulfil these criteria. It was once the convention for a widow to place a lock of the hair of her departed spouse in the back of the locket containing his portrait. Samples of this kind could be dated with some accuracy. Occasionally hair was woven into "watchchains" with gold clips for half-hunters kept in a front waistcoat pocket. These too might be associated with an identifiable person. Material from vaults and mausolea might occasionally become available, through the courtesy of the vicar, and would be extremely valuable if dated.

We ask for assistance in this research. Opportunities may arise quite unexpectedly from a chance conversation or a browse in an attic. Those able to obtain samples should send them to the Research Unit of the Royal College of General Practitioners, in small plastic bags, within envelopes bearing information about the source of the sample. Material collected by the Unit will be passed on to the laboratory workers and those sending samples will receive a report of the laboratory findings.

We welcome this new research and hope the necessary samples will be forthcoming.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 1972—CHANGE OF DATE

We have just been informed that the President-elect H.R.H. the Prince Philip will now have to be abroad on the day previously arranged for the Annual General Meeting.

Prince Philip has, however, indicated that he would like to be installed as President on Wednesday 1 November, 1972, and this has now been agreed as the new date for the Annual General Meeting.