

## CRUCIAL CORRESPONDENCE

*These and many more wrote what mattered when it mattered most.*

A COLLEGE of General Practitioners was not a new idea. R. M. S. McConaghey shows today how close it was over 100 years ago. Nor was the College, when it did come, the first academic body of general practice in the world—that distinction belongs to the Academy of General Practice (now Family Physicians) in the United States. So why was the College founded in 1952? Why did it happen then? The short answer is that this time the foundation movement was better led and better supported.

### *Leadership*

Some of the origins of the College are described today and John Hunt's James Mackenzie Lecture on this subject will be published later in the *Journal*. Nevertheless, we hope a definitive history of the College will be written—and the time for starting it is now.

Fraser Rose and John Hunt signed the famous letters reproduced today and the work of the Steering Committee under its superb Chairman, the Rt. Hon. Sir Henry Willink, was quite outstanding. John Hunt as secretary with his endless energy and unique ability produced inspiring leadership. It is easy in these sunny days to forget the squalls and even thunderstorms of opposition that had to be patiently weathered.

### *Support*

Leadership however, even of this high quality, was not enough. However great the enthusiasm of the sponsors the College could not have succeeded without widespread support.

The Steering Committee knew and were greatly encouraged by the nationwide interest shown by letters published in 1951 and 1952. Medical journals like the *British Medical Journal*, *The Lancet*, *The Practitioner* and *Medical World*, were then the only academic platform for general practice and the full significance of these letters has not previously been recognised. They were, however, an early sign of support that later produced over 1,000 members in the first two weeks.

### *Letters*

Analysis of the letters reveals three dominant themes; status, especially the general practitioner/consultant relationship, education, and research.

Looking back after 20 years they show the extent of the enthusiasm and confidence in general practice. These were men of vision. Even in those dark days thoughts were expressed about undergraduate experience of general practice, organised general-practitioner research, and university departments of general practice. Some of the ideas were 20 years ahead of their time—not all are achieved even now.

Through these letters enthusiasts identified themselves and established links which led them together to the College. It is interesting to note the names and see so many of the leaders of the College today rallying to the standard of general practice at that time: D. L. Crombie, now Vice-chairman of Council and a visiting professor in Canada; J. Fry, James Mackenzie prizewinner and now a Council member; R. M. S. McConaghey, a Foundation Councillor, who until this year edited the *Journal*; R. J. F. H. Pinsent, a member of the Steering Committee, a Foundation Councillor and today Honorary Adviser to the Research Unit; R. Scott, a member of the Steering Committee and a Foundation Councillor, who became the first Professor of General Practice in Europe and chairs the Scottish Council now; G. Swift, a Foundation Councillor who chaired the Council from 1970–1972 and who retains unbroken membership to this day; and

G. I. Watson, Foundation Councillor, Director of the Epidemic Observation Unit and President 1970–72.

These and many more wrote what mattered when it mattered most. A selection of their letters is republished today and we thank all concerned for permission to reprint.

It is sometimes said that writing letters for publication is a waste of time; that letters to editors may stimulate a passing thought and then are lost for ever; that major policy is decided in closed committees, not open to the rank and file.

These letters disprove this thesis. They show that if enough people care and take the trouble to write then collective action is possible. These letters encouraged the Steering Committee who wrote (we) “are assured of loyal and active support from many quarters”. They also changed the name of the College and proved an indication not only of the strength but of the sources of support. This correspondence was crucial.

#### REFERENCE

*British Medical Journal* (1952). College of General Practitioners—Report of the Steering Committee, 2, 1327.

## Dr G. I. WATSON

**D**R. G. I. WATSON ends this month a two-year term as President of the College. He has achieved much in many ways, particularly through his clinical work, his travelling, and his personality.

Throughout his term of office he has been, and has been seen to be, a practising clinician and is well-known as an authority on virus diseases. He has made a unique contribution in creating and developing the Epidemic Observation Unit which was historically the very first research unit of the College. It was Dr Watson who pioneered the first major multi-practice research project on the management of measles which arose directly from his Sir Charles Hastings prize essay. He was, later, the first ever to win the Hastings prize twice.

Secondly, by his travelling he has knitted the College together, by visiting many of the far-flung units. In New Zealand this autumn he completed the noteworthy achievement of having attended all the Regional Councils of the College in person.

His personality has ensured a successful presidency. He has contributed a characteristic dignity—few who heard it will ever forget his speech for the College at the 1971 council dinner.

Dr Watson faced the personal challenge of succeeding John Hunt and being succeeded in turn by Prince Philip, he has, however, ensured by his own individual style that his, the seventh presidency, was no *interregnum*, but will be seen as a further significant step in the development of the office. The College is fortunate that he is continuing to serve during the next year in the new post of deputy President.

## ONE HUNDRED UP!

**T**HIS month the hundredth notification form is bound into the pages at the back of the *Journal*. The first one appeared in the issue of February 1958, which itself was the first on whose cover the word *Journal* as well as *Research Newsletter* No. 18