

College communications

Sir,

Complaints about communication are insistent and perennial. They perhaps reflect in part weaknesses in our organisation and in part an unfamiliarity with the problem.

There are only two important kinds of communication:

- (1) Exchange of information,
- (2) Discussion or consultation on new ideas or policy including changes.

In recent years the former has been more adequately covered than the latter.

Communication should always be a two-way process. In the College the main channels which might be expected to exist are:

- (a) Princes Gate—i.e. Council and its Committees and Officers, to:
 - (i) Faculty Boards,
 - (ii) Total membership (i.e. fellows, members and associates) via the Headquarters Secretariat or honorary secretaries and other officers.
- (b) Faculty Boards to their own faculty membership.

In each of these the communications should be in either or both directions.

It appears that sometimes there is a semantic problem when talking of "communication between Council (or its officers and committees) and the Faculties". In fact this is most frequently to be interpreted as "communication between Council (or its officers and committees) and Faculty Boards", rather than the total faculty membership.

It further appears that for matters considered to be urgent, many Faculties operate through the machinery of an executive committee, resembling the General Purposes Committee or Chairman's Committee of Council. Others appear to have no machinery for rapid action.

Although the functions of these various bodies are held to be contained within their published terms of reference these latter are often capable of wide interpretation perhaps wisely. 'Urgency' is also capable of wide and sometimes idiosyncratic interpretation.

It can be held that 'discussion and consultation' refer in the main to questions of College policy.

Such subjects may be grouped as follows:

- (1) Matters where the College is itself developing or changing policy in either:
 - (a) the long term,
 - (b) the short term.
- (b) may have long-term effects. It is the time available for forming policy which is of great importance.
- (2) Matters where the College is itself being requested by other bodies or by proposed changes of medical, academic, or political circumstance to declare a policy not previously considered, or if considered, not yet stated.

Existing methods of communication

The present arrangements for the exchange of information are:

- (1) *The Journal*, with its reports from Council and other committees and 'Letters to the Editor',
- (2) *The Annual Report*,
- (3) Faculty representation,
- (4) Visits—official or unofficial—by officers and members of Council to Faculties and vice-versa,
- (5) College publications—such as *Reports from General Practice* and the journal supplements,
- (6) Reports and requests sent out from headquarters and those received.

While the above refer mainly to the passage of information between headquarters and Faculties—Faculty Boards in particular—there are important channels also between Faculty Boards and faculty membership. These are most often represented by faculty newsletters, and in some Faculties by the circulation of the minutes of faculty board proceedings. These channels may sometimes be one-way if members do not themselves communicate.

Problems of communication

There can be problems of communication in all of these listed ways. The problems can occur in either or in both directions.

The major problems appear to be between the Headquarters and individual members and between Faculty Boards and the individual members of the Faculty, in particular in the areas of consultation and discussion.

It appears to be not so well appreciated that the process of election to Faculty Boards and to Council is also a process of delegation. What is delegated is the function of assistance in policy-making. The duties of two-way communication are more explicit. If delegates are held not to be fulfilling their functions then a simple democratic remedy is available.

It follows that the Faculty Representatives are a most important link in the chain of two-way communication. The centre of an organisation should be the place where things happen, where ideas arrive or are produced, are tossed around, and where advancing fringes are brought together to be refined, accepted, postponed or rejected. It is also the place where policy has to be determined against a wide background of membership opinion and external circumstances.

Great care therefore is no doubt taken by Faculties in appointing their representatives to Council. They do not regard it as of first importance to see that each should have his turn. They see that the representative has himself or herself the gift of communication, wedded to the intention to communicate.

Thus, Faculty Boards and Council provide time at their meetings for the views of the Board or Council to be made known through the representatives. Where time is made available it is used to the best advantage. The communications from the representative are not always verbal. They may be to report on or discuss written material, after which a consensus view can be obtained, for in truth the College and its Faculties operate largely by consensus. In a democratic institution they can do no other.

The representative may be in difficulty if his personal view is in opposition to the consensus view which he is to put forward. He is in honour bound to:

1. Report the consensus view as fervently as he presents his own personal view, or
2. If he should feel sufficiently strongly he must allow someone else to present the consensus view.

Faculties, in our organisation, must have at least an equal responsibility to their membership as has Council to Faculty Boards and to the total membership of the College.

It is where the College is being pressed for rapid presentations of its views—which may be equated with its policy—that the greatest difficulties arise.

So often does the Department of Health and Social Security, the General Medical Services Committee, the General Medical Council or some other important body request the 'views of the College' on a matter of importance. There would be no problem if these views were not also requested to be provided by such and such a date, too often between six and eight weeks or even less.

It is here that our communication machinery often fails. At Headquarters we have a Council which meets once a quarter, a General Purposes Committee which does likewise midway between Council meetings, while a Chairman's Committee, consisting of the Chairman and Officers of Council plus the chairmen of the major committees of Council, can be called at any time to deal with urgent business, especially matters of policy.

Responsibility of the Faculties

Some Faculties are prepared, as they wish to take an effective part in College discussions and consultations, to provide a similar machinery, such as an Executive Committee. Quick decisions forced by circumstance and the needs of other bodies, may only be undertaken by small bodies

which may rapidly be convened or circulated to present views or answers to questions. Democracy should be preserved by the fact that these small bodies consist of people delegated to undertake such functions. Their decisions are open to question by, and the individuals concerned themselves responsible to those who delegated to them authority to act, the Council, Faculty or College membership.

Faculties may wish to have or to create a machinery which is capable of producing a consensus view in no longer than one month on matters of urgency for the College.

It must be recognised that such procedures may of themselves promote *post hoc* opposition, especially on contentious problems, but if any effective decision-making is to exist this seems an inevitable consequence.

Problems can arise when Council or Faculty Boards change officers, and particularly if newcomers, eager to make a mark, have not done their homework. That is if they have not studied the minutes and correspondence and had discussions with their predecessors.

Problems can also arise if Council or Faculty Boards permit powerful personalities too much latitude, although this may seem unlikely.

On its part, Council, in its officers and committees, and its secretariat, have the inescapable duty of making attempts at discussion and consultation. The areas for required decisions should be clearly indicated and full background information or references provided. They may only rely on the Faculties for response and sometimes initiation. In this case the same requirements would obtain. When we communicate quickly yet thoughtfully, we not only provide a valuable service to the College, we will also be heard. When we do not, we can make no effective contribution.

I hope that these thoughts may be a basis for discussion of an incessant set of problems. It seems unlikely that any overall prescriptive solution exists, or that any will be found. It seems, however, certain that we may better resolve our difficulties by first defining them and their sources and then by proposing and implementing solutions.

In fact, if we operate corporately as general-practitioner clinicians, applying the *modus operandi* of our daily lives to an administrative situation, we should be able to achieve some necessary improvements.

P. S. BYRNE
President

Royal College of General Practitioners

14 Princes Gate,
Hyde Park,
London, SW7 1PU.

AUSTRALIA

The first free and comprehensive health centre in Australia opened in July 1973 in the Canberra suburb of Melba.

The centre is staffed by two doctors, a dentist, a district nurse, a baby-clinic sister, four receptionists, a dental assistant, a social health visitor, a pharmacist and an assistant. Specialists including a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a dietitian and an occupational therapist will visit it occasionally.

The centre will be open all day and one doctor will be on call at night.

REFERENCE

The Times. (1973) 2 July.