

subject for not only do I believe this decision casts a slur by implication on all college members, I have little doubt that it will be resented by many of our colleagues who are not members who nevertheless strive to maintain standards comparable with those rightly set by the College.

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PATIENT'S ASSOCIATION IN A GENERAL PRACTICE

Sir,

Having read the Editorial and articles in the January *Journal* on *Patient Power*, I would like to report on an enterprise which has just been started in our three-man, predominantly middle-class, practice in Bristol. It consists of a practice association to which any of our patients may belong and contribute.

Its aims are: to provide the practice community with a voice in the organisation of its general medical care, both at the surgery level (e.g. appointments systems) and at the community level (e.g. home care for the elderly); to provide effective means of two-way communication between our patients and their doctors, allowing an open airing of views on all relevant subjects, particularly those which are at all controversial, and which may sometimes cause ill-feeling (e.g. difficulties with the appointments system, home visiting policy); to foster discussions of a purely informative nature (e.g. aspects of health education, advances in medicine); to augment, and possibly help in co-ordinating, the existing voluntary services within the community; and lastly, and certainly not least, to help keep the doctors on their toes, and to encourage a continuing process of self—and practice—audit.

The provision of medical care in this country is insufficiently democratic, particularly at the grass-roots level of general practice. However well a practice is run, patients have a right to be consulted and to express their opinions and criticisms of it. After all, they pay for it.

The phrase "patient power" has become a very emotive one for many people, especially doctors. It's as nasty an expression as "doctor dictatorship"; "patient partnership" is surely nearer the mark. I think one reason why our profession has not yet accepted the idea is that there is a fear that the "patient power" will

get out of hand and threaten doctors' clinical independence.

In September 1973 copies of the following statement were put in the waiting-room:

"In recent years there has been a marked increase in the interest shown by "lay" people in all medical matters, particularly, perhaps, in the relationship between patients and doctors. A suggestion has therefore been made that a "Patients' Association" be formed for this practice, run by yourselves, to provide an opportunity for:

(1) Discussion, suggestions, comments and criticism concerning the way this practice is run and the provision of patient care.

(2) Discussion of future plans affecting the practice and yourselves.

It might also be possible, with the help of such an association, to set up a register of volunteers for various purposes, such as transport for the elderly, which are not fully provided for by the Health and Social Services.

If you are interested in being involved in the setting-up and running of this association, or have any suggestions to make as to how it might best function, please contact....."

By the middle of December about 1,000 copies had been taken away. About 30 people contacted me either wanting to be involved in the association or offering their services for voluntary work. An inaugural meeting was arranged for February, and I was delighted to see about 40 people turn up.

The discussion that ensued was both enthusiastic and encouraging. It was emphasised that the association was to be run entirely by the patients, but that the doctors would be ready and willing to participate in every way possible. It was decided that a steering committee should be formed, and 14 of the patients volunteered for this. One obvious difficulty which has to be overcome is that of ensuring that the association is truly representative of practice opinion as a whole, and not just of those few who have become involved. There are communication difficulties here which we hope will not be insuperable.

The way things develop should be exciting; I hope to report on them another time. In the meantime I would be very grateful to hear from any other reader who has had any experience with this sort of experiment, or who has any suggestions or observations to make.

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