

RESPONSE RATES TO QUESTIONNAIRES

Sir,

The rate of response to questionnaires of any kind is an important problem in research. In a recent postal survey of general practitioners in England we were very pleased to have 59 per cent of our questionnaires returned to us from their first mailing and Dr Meynen (*August Journal*) should be grateful for a 57 per cent response to his own questionnaire.

We subsequently increased our total response rate to 85 per cent by the standard technique of sending reminders to those doctors who had not responded at first, but it appears that Dr Meynen would not have been able to identify the non-responders among those patients who chose to take one of his forms. Self-selection within his population is only one of his methodological problems and even without this his sample appears to have been unrepresentative in other ways, so that he can actually have no idea of the attitudes of his patients to the projected change to a health centre.

The point is that these small operational and behavioural studies in general practices are extremely worthwhile for a number of reasons—not least those of demonstrating interest and initiative on the part of the doctor and his staff. If they are used in determining a course of action (i.e. as management information) so much the better, but the information is useless or even harmful if it is made seriously inaccurate because of faulty scientific method. Dr Meynen's overt cost of £2.40 would have been increased very little by taking advice about sampling and related matters and an increasing number of research organisations are willing and able to help in this way.

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REFERENCE

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THE M.R.C.G.P. EXAMINATION

Sir,

Unfortunately I missed Professor Wilkes' article in your *March Journal*, but I did read Dr Halle's riposte last month, and do not envy the professor's task in replying to the 12 specific question marks in his critic's letter.

Specific questions are usually unanswerable—to the satisfaction of the questioner, anyway. I will try to answer them in general; I have been a keen supporter of the College of

General Practitioners since its inception. I have always thought general practice a specialty in its own right—though 15 years ago its standing was poor, as was its reputation within the junior and senior hospital staffs (though not so poor as they would suggest with the general public). Many of us felt that there were standards which should be maintained by general practitioners, and some banded together with great dedication to found the College. This idea I supported with all my heart.

Then there came the question of an examination for membership. Like Dr Halle, I was at first dubious—how could you quantify and examine the qualities which make up the family doctor? Many of Dr Halle's questions explore this problem. The answer is, of course, they cannot—any more than the M.R.C.P. can make a good physician, or the F.R.C.S. can make a conscientious surgeon.

Specialty examinations depend upon the screening of technical ability. Techniques are practised in family medicine, and it is possible to examine candidates in their proficiency in these techniques, whether they be physical assessment (possibly in limited time) or psychological appraisals which can not be taught only in the psychiatric wards of the student's teaching hospital. Examining methods have advanced much during the last five years.

It has been my privilege to know how careful and controlled are the examination criteria for the M.R.C.G.P. and indeed are the heart-searchings of the examiners, who are not necessarily founder members of the College, nor think themselves better general practitioners than anyone else—but do have a strong view that general practice ought to have a standing as a medical specialty in its own right, and therefore believe that candidates should satisfy certain criteria as detached scientists in pursuit of the ideal of individual health and happiness.

Perhaps I should add that I am not an examiner myself!

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THE ARTS AS AIDS TO LEARNING

Sir,

I like your editorial (*August Journal*), probably because I have never been competent at chemistry or physics and only came late to a modest appreciation of the arts. I suspect that