

The future of the College – 3.

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Introduction

FOR a long time now I have been discussing with the Officers of Council and others my concern that the College would be better served by a stronger structure of Committees of Council. I argue that the Board of Censors and the Education Committee should be recreated as separate college committees. Such a reform must be part of a more fundamental answer to the widespread criticism of the College by its own membership—that its government is increasingly autocratic and that decision-taking seems to be increasingly in the hands of fewer people.

In recent years there have been attempts, on the grounds of financial economy, to reduce the number of major committees of Council, the number of non-council members recruited to these committees, and the number of occasions on which they meet. Inevitably the result of such a decision is that fewer new faces appear in the corridors of Princes Gate. Fewer, smaller and less frequently held major committees of Council do nothing to impair the machinery of college government. Quite the contrary, the engine is able to function at full power. The direction in which we move, however, becomes increasingly predictable and increasingly less exciting.

Committee structure

We need a stronger committee structure for the following reasons:

1. So that Council can be better and more expeditiously advised by the most competent group of college members which can be brought together.
2. To give a larger number of the most able people in the College the opportunity to contribute directly to decision making.
3. We need to ensure that there are a number of major committees in which young members are given the opportunity to 'show their paces'. This is vital if the future government of the College is to be in the most able hands, and if we are to avoid the dangers of an

inbred oligarchy or, worse still, an intellectual nepotism.

4. A strong committee structure, each with an able team of officers, will be able to share the many pressures which now fall directly on the Officers of Council, and in particular on its secretary. When the present secretary retires, it is vital that the many tasks and roles now being carried out by him should devolve not on an assistant secretary but on a larger group. If a more sensible balance of power sharing in the membership of Council and its committees is achieved, as I believe it should be, there will be no need for an assistant secretary.

These arguments go much deeper than the separation of the Board of Censors from the Education Committee. When I was asked to list some of the most important educational tasks now facing the College, it struck me that we should also be discussing the tasks of the Board of Censors and perhaps those of some of the smaller committees as well, because it may be that Council will wish to reallocate some of these tasks in the future.

Educational priorities

In education the following tasks should now be undertaken:

1. Responses to requests from outside bodies (for example, from the Joint Committee on Postgraduate Training for General Practice about the content of half-day release courses, our views on part-time training, or career change).
2. The development and encouragement of experimental courses, including any possible sequel to the Nuffield Courses.
3. The development of peer group review programmes for continuing education, developing the present work of the Clinical Standards Working Party.
4. The development of educational strategies in response to such challenges as the Court Report.
5. Liaison with other educational bodies, for example the Association of University Teachers of General Practice (AUTGP), the JCPT, the General Medical

Council, other Royal Colleges at home, and Colleges of General Practice abroad.

6. A fifth report, as opposed to a new edition of *The Future General Practitioner* (RCGP, 1972). The reports coming from the JCPT make it very clear what kind of new publication is required. It will take us at least three years, judging by past experience, to produce something worthwhile. We should start this task now.

This is a sample, not a final list. The most important and exciting items on it will be raised only when the recruitment to the committee is of such a quality that the membership can generate new and vital tasks.

MRCGP examination

Clearly the main task of the Board of Censors is the development of the reliability and eventually the validity of the MRCGP examination. In particular I think that we ought to clarify the relationship between this Board and the Panel of Examiners. This relationship is often unclear and it is difficult to know which body initiates changes or experiment.

There is much work to be done if we are to make the examination valid in terms of clinical performance, and this sort of initiative can be taken only with a very strong Board of Censors largely recruited from the best of our examiners.

Awards and Ethical Committee

Our discussions should also include an examination of the Awards and Ethical Committee. I am told that ethical matters are rarely discussed (or almost never reported) and the meetings are short, over lunch, with little time for debate. It seems that such a committee is not the strongest body capable of advising Council about important educational awards such as the William Pickles Lecture, the Butterworth Gold Medal, the Upjohn Fellowships, and the Undergraduate Essay Prize. These should properly be the concern of the Education Committee. If the College has a body of experts in medical education, let us use it to advise Council. By the same token, I would make the Fellowship Committee a committee of a new and strengthened Board of Censors. I would also like to see the Board of Censors making recommendations about honorary fellows.

Officers of Council

These reforms would include not only increasing the number of committees, the size of the recruitment from outside Council, and possibly the frequency of their meetings, but would also return to these committees their importance in making decisions and effecting change. In the past, the presence of Officers of Council at these committee meetings has been of inestimable value—particularly in considering matters of timing or in relating decisions to other College activities and

policies. In recent years, certainly in meetings of the Education Committee, the Officers of Council have tended to come in late, to ask for the order of business to be changed in order to be present for one or two items, and then to leave early to attend some other important meeting. These brief encounters do not so much embarrass the useful work of these committees as they reflect the diminishing importance of the debates for the formation of college policy.

It would be unrealistic to expect every officer of Council to attend all the meetings of all the major committees. As a part of the reforms which I am advocating we should perhaps look again at the tasks of the officers—specifically in relation to the major committees—in particular, the tasks of the Vice-Chairman and Deputy Vice-Chairman of Council.

Urgency

In conclusion I want to argue against delay. The changes which I suggest can and should be effected in the next session. It has been suggested to me that I do not take a radical enough approach. The Secretary of Council has suggested that the views of faculties be first canvassed; that they be asked, in relation to the document which College presented to the Royal Commission on the National Health Service, what tasks they wish to carry out and what sort of committee structures they themselves feel that they need. The time is ripe for such an approach and I support it. But it should not be used as an argument for delay in reforms which Council itself must make in its own structure and function. Indeed, to announce such immediate reforms and such a widening of involvement at the same time as we go to the faculties for their opinions can only increase the authority with which Council asks for this advice and enhance the confidence of faculties in the way in which Council will respond to their answers.

To the Research and Practice Organization Committee, Education Committee, and Board of Censors, we may later wish to add an Anticipatory Care Committee (the major college committee envisaged in John Horder's recent papers). Without this sort of central structure, the College will not be able to take advantage of the growing number of able people who now have little contact with Princes Gate. But, for busy doctors to give the time and energy which membership of a major committee demands, the relevance of that committee's work to the development of the College and of general practice must be restored. We must take these steps now if we are to avoid the tendency to become increasingly doctrinaire and to develop in a narrow, perhaps insular, way.

Reference

Court Committee on Child Health Services (1976). *Fit for the Future*. London: HMSO.