
EDITORIALS

Preventing promotion

THE College has resumed full responsibility for the *Journal*, and this is the first issue under the new publishing and printing arrangements. While the main reason for the changes was the wish to develop the *Journal* in line with the needs and aspirations of the College, the timing has been influenced by commercial factors. This is also an opportune moment to reflect on the aims and functions of the *Journal* and on the relationship between editorial and commercial factors in publishing.

The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners, which originated in 1953/54 as a research newsletter, is well established as a journal of record, publishing original papers of relevance to general practice. We can rightly claim that it has been successful in doing this and promise that it will continue to publish as many original papers as possible. The *Journal* has also been used in recent years to publicize College activities and as a forum where Members can express their ideas. To provide an efficient information service, the production time needs to be as short as possible: the change from perfect binding to saddle-stitch binding, as well as being cheaper, will reduce the production time and further speeding up of the News and Views section is envisaged.

Most changes occur through a combination of choice and necessity. This is certainly true in the case of advertising in the *Journal*. We have received adverse comments over the years about the intrusion of advertising material into the text. The decision by the College to take over publication of the *Journal* coincided with an abrupt fall in advertisements placed by the pharmaceutical industry, which was the result of the Government's restricting promotional budgets and calling back a proportion of the overall profits of the pharmaceutical firms. All medical publications have been affected by this drop in advertising. In recent years the net cost to the College of producing the *Journal* has been almost halved through advertising revenue, but we are fortunate in that it is not solely dependent on advertising

income for survival. The next few months will enable an interesting forced experiment because the number of advertisements will be so low that there will be no intrusion into the text.

The relationship between advertising and editorial material is a subtle one. Medical publications which are totally dependent on advertising have to reach high readership figures in order to sell space to advertisers; the strength of the market in recent years has been so great that many new publications have appeared. As a consequence, the general practitioner is bombarded with free publications vying with one another for his or her attention. This results in both the editorial and the advertising copy aiming for immediate impact rather than for quiet and sober provision of information. Just as countries are said to get the governments they deserve, perhaps general practitioners get the press they deserve. Some of the free publications contain useful information presented in an entertaining and readable fashion; it is harder to find justification for a special edition of *Punch* for general practitioners financed wholly by drug advertisements.

The reduction in promotional budgets forced upon the pharmaceutical industry should be its opportunity for developing a style that is less fanatical and flamboyant. The decision to prescribe a particular drug should be made on rational and informed grounds. Advertisements at present seem to emphasize image at the expense of information. Restriction in the advertising budgets of the pharmaceutical firms may be a benefit if it prevents pure promotion and releases funds for sounder research and educational activities. Our major research-based pharmaceutical firms have made great contributions to British medicine. Through foundations and awards they have encouraged and supported postgraduate medical education. In the long term, the pharmaceutical industry and general practice will continue to flourish only if they both remain high in public esteem.