

Informing patients about medicines

D.M. BURLEY

Chairman, Medico-Pharmaceutical Forum

Information about medicines was the subject of a meeting held in June 1985 by the Medico-Pharmaceutical Forum, which aimed to bring together patients and health care professionals to discuss the type, quantity and quality of information about medicines and their proper use.

Discussions highlighted the lack of adequate information about medicines which was available to patients in the United Kingdom, and emphasized the need for literature explaining to patients how to use medicines to their best advantage and what side-effects to look out for and report to their doctor. Professor Charles George of Southampton University spoke about his research to ascertain the patient's reception of information on medicines. He showed examples of leaflets for patients written at two levels: one giving basic information about how and when to take the medicine, the importance of completing a course of treatment and possible side effects; the other giving more details about the timing of doses, storage of the medicine and possible points for discussion with the general practitioner. Dr Denis Burley, Chairman of the Medico-Pharmaceutical Forum, had examined how France and the United States of America have tackled this problem, and explained that both countries have done a considerable amount of work on informing patients about drugs, providing information on most of the important therapeutic areas and giving advice on medicines and the consequences of their use.

Dr Jerry Cowhig, editor of *General Practitioner*, stressed the importance of writing information about drugs at a level appropriate to the average reading age of the practice population. The problems of illiteracy and of language difficulties among immigrants highlighted the need for written information to be supported by pictorial information. Certain groups had special needs which should be borne in mind when prescribing, and pregnant women and the elderly were mentioned in this respect.

Dr Andrew Herxheimer, of Charing Cross and Westminster Hospital Medical School, and Professor Michael Drury, Professor of General Practice at Birmingham, both spoke about the need for general practitioners to inform patients about medicines, to be aware of the proper use of medicines and to know how to convey information to their patients.

Mr John Balmford from the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain emphasized the pharmacists' role in helping patients to understand and comply with their medicinal regime. It was important that medicine containers should be labelled with essential information as to how and when to take the medicine and whether there were likely to be any side-effects. Mr Bill Gerard from the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry told the meeting that by the beginning of 1987 it was anticipated that manufacturers' packs would be passed on directly to patients, thus enabling manufacturers to place inserts into the containers giving appropriate information on proper use.

The meeting concluded that an early start must be made in the production of literature for the medicines in most common use, and that the creation of such literature must involve the pharmaceutical industry and patients' representatives as well as general practitioners.

Information Technology Centre

This department of the College offers a variety of electronic equipment for demonstration to general practitioners and senior practice staff in addition to the series of computer appreciation courses currently provided. At the moment, VAMP

Health's Integrated General Practice computer system is available for demonstration, and both the Information Technology Manager and the Technical Assistant will be happy to arrange to show this system to enquirers.

Appointments can be made to see the system and further details can be obtained by contacting the Information Technology Centre at 14 Princes Gate, London SW7 1PU. Tel. 01-581 3232, ext 232.

The Data Protection Act

The Data Protection Act received Royal Assent in July 1984. The Act is designed to regulate and monitor the use of automatically processed information relating to living individuals. The Act establishes a Data Protection Registrar, Mr Eric Howe, and a Data Protection Tribunal. It is the responsibility of the Registrar to establish a register of data users who hold personal data. From 11 November 1985, all data users (for example, general practitioners) and computer bureaux, subject to certain exemptions, will be required to register particulars of the personal data held by them. It is worth noting that registration of existing activities must be undertaken within six months of the appointed day, that is by 11 May 1986. However, the full powers of the Registrar and subject access will not come into effect until two years after the appointed day, that is, from 11th November 1987. Further details about the Data Protection Act will appear in the December *Journal*.

National Schizophrenia Fellowship

The Fellowship has recently published two leaflets prepared by Dr Julian Leff and others. The first, *Schizophrenia. Notes for relatives and friends*, is designed for 'new' relatives. The second is called *Psychiatric diagnosis. Notes for relatives and friends*.

Copies of both leaflets may be obtained from the National Schizophrenia Fellowship, 78 Victoria Road, Surbiton, Surrey KT6 4NS. Tel. 01-390 3651.

A retirement party in Wensleydale

CHRISTOPHER BOOTH

Director, Clinical Research Centre, Harrow

The Yorkshire Dales have been made famous by James Herriot, author of *All creatures great and small*. It is perhaps less well known that Wensleydale was the birthplace of Dr John Fothergill, Benjamin Franklin's physician and friend in London, and that Dr William Hillary, who attended Lawrence and George Washington during their visit to the island of Barbados in 1753, was also a Wensleydale man. More recently, Dr William Pickles, the dale's general practitioner, achieved medical renown with his work *Epidemiology in country practice* which has become a classic.

When Dr Pickles's last partners in the practice — Bernard and Katherine Coltman — retired after more than 30 years of service to the rural community of Wensleydale, the occasion was marked by a gathering at the Village Institute of Aysgarth. There is a plaque on the wall, placed there by the Royal College of General Practitioners, which records the life and work of Dr Pickles, the family doctor and epidemiologist who was the first President of the College and who died in 1969. Pickles had recruited Dr Bernard Coltman, who had seen service with the RAF during the war, as his new partner in 1946. It was to be one of the worst winters for snow on record and Pickles was concerned that his new recruit would be discouraged. He need

not have worried, for when the New Year came the doctor took time off to get married and he brought back his doctor wife, Katherine, to join him in the practice. Over 30 years later more than 300 of their patients gathered to do them honour. Their two sons were there, both educated at nearby Sedbergh School where Fothergill too had studied as a boy. There were farmers, their wives and children, small businessmen and the current owners of Carr End, the farm where John Fothergill was born. Many had been brought into the world by the doctors who, in the early years of their practice, undertook their own obstetrics.

A local building contractor who, like his father before him, doubled as the community's funeral director, addressed the gathering and referred to Dr Bernard Coltman's laconic style. He would come to your house, he remarked, examine you and then stare fixedly out of the window for several minutes. Finally, he would pronounce his verdict. 'Your gate needs fixing' he would say, and as he departed he would add 'You know, you'll have to learn to live with it'. You had no idea, said the builder whether he meant the excruciating pain in the back of your neck or the gate.

A lawyer friend referred with approval to the arrival of the lady doctor who was regarded in that isolated farming community of North Yorkshire as an extraordinary novelty. She had soon established herself. There were those in later years who said, 'I'd rairther have t' lass than t' lad'. He spoke too of her learned articles in medical journals but did not refer to her work on urinary infection in general practice for which, although few persons there knew it, she had been awarded one of the research prizes of the British Medical Association. He then presented the six beautiful Hepplewhite dining room chairs that were the gift to the doctors from their patients and which grace their retirement home.

Katherine Coltman in her reply, said that it was the first time in years that she had been to a meeting without a shovel and a pair of trousers in the back of the car. Bernard Coltman described his detailed knowledge of the vicissitudes of travel on the roads of Wensleydale in winter, and bewailed the fact that modern medicine in the National Health Service meant that five minutes were spent with the patient and then 10 minutes were spent filling in forms. He recalled what Dr Pickles had told him when he first joined the practice: that it was unwise for both doctors to go together to a consultation at home since it was generally believed by the patient to be a death sentence. Referral of a patient to the local hospital 30 miles away was often seen in the same light. Then he thanked all who had helped them with their work — the ambulance men, the volunteer workers, the district nurses and, in particular, the road workers, who in winter had enabled him to make his calls whatever the road conditions. He particularly thanked the supervisors of the drug dispensary who knew more about individual patients in the practice and their failings than anyone else.

And so to tea and homemade cakes and then home through the russets and golds of a fine October evening.

WONCA 1986

WONCA 1986 — Competition

Sterling Research Laboratories, a division of the Sterling Winthrop Group, have generously agreed to sponsor the attendance of six UK general practitioners at the 1986 WONCA Conference to be held at the Barbican in London on 1-6 June 1986.

The awards will be given to the winners of an essay competition related to the conference theme. Each award will cover the conference registration, accommodation and travelling expenses

within the UK. The competition is open to all UK general practitioners, including trainees.

Further information and entry forms can be obtained from Sterling Research Laboratories (WONCA 1986 Awards), Sterling Winthrop House, Onslow Street, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4YS.

Primary health care 2000: global challenges

The WONCA International Meeting in June 1986 will provide an opportunity for participants to examine progress to date on the objectives set out in the declaration of Alma-Ata in 1978. *Primary health care 2000: global challenges*, edited by John Fry and John Hasler, will be published to coincide with the meeting, and will follow both its theme and its scientific programme. Part one of the book examines the common global aspects of primary health care; part two contains individual contributions from all those countries committed to establishing primary health care systems and focuses on the particular problems and needs which confront them; and part three offers a summary of common problems and recommendations for the future.

Primary health care 2000 is being offered at a special concessionary price to delegates and members of participant organizations of WONCA, and orders received before 30 April 1986 will be offered the concessionary rate of £19.00. The full price which applies after publication in June 1986 will be £23.00. Orders should be sent to the Sales Promotion Department, Churchill Livingstone, 1-3 Baxter's Place, Leith Walk, Edinburgh EH1 3AF.

OBITUARY

Dr George Cooper

Dr George Cooper died peacefully in his sleep at Inch Cottage Hospital, Aberdeenshire, on 27 July 1985 aged 102 years.

The son of Mr John Cooper, Dunnydeer, Inch, he came to London shortly after graduating from Aberdeen University in 1906, and eventually joined the practice of Dr John Durno, Coldharbour Lane, London SE5, where he remained until his retirement in 1961.

Always an innovator, he welcomed the 1912 panel scheme which, despite its shortcomings, gave some positive help to the health care of the low paid worker. The First World War caused him a serious illness, but a stay in a sanatorium resulted in recovery and he was able to resume work after requesting and being granted extra rations of sugar and butter.

Domiciliary midwifery was his great specialty — being a farmer's son, he said that it was second nature to him. His professional colleagues always called on him to help them with difficult confinements, his expert help being willingly given at all times, night and day.

The Second World War was, as he used to say, much better organized than the first and he remained at work throughout. The blitz he considered exciting, and he was constantly rescuing and attending to the casualties. After the war he was busier than ever, with a huge influx of patients at the commencement of the National Health Service in 1948. Right up to his retirement at the age of 77 years he was fully active doing more than his share of work in the practice.

He enjoyed an active and happy retirement on his farm, Dunnydeer House, until a few weeks before his death.

A.P.D.