

# In pursuit of quality

THE art of the historian is to distil from vast numbers of events a picture or pattern which lends meaning to the scene. Historians, although working at a distance in terms of time, nevertheless do have the great advantage of being able to look back knowing what actually happened. It is not easy in the welter of contemporary activities to detect those events which have a special significance or which act as pointers to the future.

The study day organized by the King's Fund and held before an invited audience in London on 5 June 1984 had a special quality. Many of those present sensed a special significance and several of the speakers did foresee that the issue of quality of care in general practice would soon come to dominate the medico-political scene.

The book *In pursuit of quality* now published by the Royal College of General Practitioners stems from that study day and some of the chapters are directly related to the papers presented then. The contributions by the three editors, David Pendleton, Theo Schofield and Marshall Marinker, arise from the depth of their knowledge of the subject and from their special involvement with it.

The book is in two parts: the first deals with performance review in general and the second with current methods and results; in other words the book deals with both principles and practice.

It is appropriate that the book should begin with a discussion on performance review and professional values by Marshall Marinker, Director of the MSD Foundation, and this serves as a valuable introduction. Another useful chapter follows by David Pendleton, at that time Stuart Fellow of the College, but who has since moved into management.

Other authors in turn tackle several of the major issues involved in performance review. Practice activity analysis, pioneered by the Birmingham Research Unit of the College and forever associated with the names of Crombie and Pinsent, is explored by Douglas Fleming, and the need to encourage general practitioners to measure what is happening in the practice remains one of the fundamental principles of general practice. Continuing the section on scene setting, Roy Flux and Gordon Best discuss performance indicators in the National Health Service, John Horder compares developments in different countries of Europe, and the Mourins describe personal approaches to performance review and give a comprehensive overview of the literature. The section ends with Horder and colleagues tackling some of the complexities of the terminology of performance review.

The second part of the book shows how quality in general practice can be achieved. The medico-political problems involved in list size and standards of care remain a minefield and the Canterbury Unit is well represented by John Butler, who tries to tease out some of the factors involved. David Metcalfe discusses the process and some of the variations in provision of primary care, and an important study by Freeling and Burton shows how audit can be approached through the peer group which is emerging throughout the UK as one of the tools for the job. Martin Lawrence, now a Senior Lecturer in General Practice at Oxford, describes how the annual residential course held at New College, Oxford, significantly alters doctors' behaviour, and the multi-author chapter on educational

developments in the Northern Region, presented at the study day mainly by Donald Irvine and Ian Russell, describes what is in some ways the most radical research on quality in general practice now being conducted in the UK. It raises fascinating educational issues and the mind-boggling statistics of latin square statistics frightened many of the participants at the King's Fund.

The study day pointed directly to the 'What sort of doctor?' study, which was presented by Theo Schofield and David Pendleton. This has of course since been published as *Report from general practice 23*,<sup>1</sup> the first of a triad of documents to emerge on this subject in the last nine months.

The finale of the study day, and also to the book, was appropriately given by Professor Avedis Donabedian, Distinguished Professor of Public Health at the University of Michigan, USA. Donabedian is the doyen of quality of care and has contributed much original thinking to its understanding and development. His generous remark that developments in quality of care in British general practice compare favourably with developments elsewhere in the world enabled the study day to finish on a deservedly high note, as indeed does the book.

*In pursuit of quality* should not be considered in isolation from the other College documents on quality published during the last nine months. Although it has come third in the trio of publications (*What sort of doctor?*<sup>1</sup> was published in July 1985 and *Quality in general practice*<sup>2</sup> in November 1985), it should more correctly be seen as preceding the other two publications. It was certainly some of the ideas and research outlined in this book that stimulated and underpinned the many discussions and drafts that went into producing the College's policy statement on quality.

Historians in the future are likely to see these three College documents as legs of a tripod, as they are all interlinked and interdependent. *In pursuit of quality* describes some of the research, *What sort of doctor?* describes a possible process, and *Quality in general practice* sets an organizational framework for pursuing quality of care.

As early as July 1972 the word 'quality' emerged in the editorial columns of this *Journal*<sup>3</sup> and the title 'Quality in question' underlined what was then and still is, the central issue for the discipline. The conclusion then was that 'those who agree ... that general practice in Britain is full of promise for the future, must justify their faith with facts'. Now, 14 years later, that faith is being justified and in *In pursuit of quality* some of the facts are being found.

*In pursuit of quality* is published by the Royal College of General Practitioners and is available from the Publications Sales Office, 8 Queens Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JE, price £15.00, including postage. Payment should be made with order.

## References

1. Royal College of General Practitioners. *What sort of doctor? Report from general practice 23*. London: RCGP, 1985.
2. Royal College of General Practitioners. *Quality in general practice. Policy statement 2*. London: RCGP, 1985.
3. Anonymous. Quality in question. *J R Coll Gen Pract* 1972; 22: 425-426.