

NEWS

Honorary Editor: Dr Edwin Martin
Editor: Janet Fricker

Contents

Council Report	481
Age Concern	482
New appointments	483
Asthma swim; Health Visitors' 90th birthday	484
College Museum and Archives	485
Iranian Embassy siege	486
Hong Kong '87; Annual Symposium	488

COUNCIL

MRCGP Examination

The following statement was agreed by Council at its meeting on 20 September 1986 and circulated to Council Members, Faculty Secretaries, Chairmen and Provosts:—

The Council of the Royal College of General Practitioners has today considered matters relating to the organisation of its Membership Examination.

It has endorsed unanimously the action taken by the Chairman of Council in relieving Dr Andrew Belton of his position as Chief Examiner and has agreed that Dr Belton's style and judgement in communication in this senior and sensitive post made that decision necessary. The Council wishes to make it clear that the action did not result from any personal or professional misconduct on the part of Dr Belton.

Council regrets that his was necessary and acknowledges Dr Belton's contribution to the development of the MRCGP Examination. He took office as Chief Examiner at a time of transition and led the examiners with flair and enthusiasm. He retains the posts of examiner and Convenor of the Multiple Choice Question Paper.

Council has endorsed recommendations from the Membership Division Executive agreed earlier in the week in discussion with the Examination Working Group. These are intended to relieve the anxieties of the Examiners, and to ensure that the examination can continue to be efficiently run in future.

Meanwhile, preparations for the October examination are going ahead.

Dr J.C. Hasler
Chairman of Council
20 September 1986

Dr John Lee, the Chairman of the Membership Division, and Dr John Emanuel, a representative of the Panel of Examiners, sent a joint letter with a copy of the above statement to the Panel of Examiners about the way ahead in the running of the examination.

Council agreed to establish a working party to consider the future relationship between the examination, the Panel of Examiners and Council. The working party will consist of President Michael Drury

with Dr Colin Waine, Chairman of the Communications Division and Professor John Walker, member of Council and a past Chairman of the Membership Division. Candidates can be reassured that Council are confident that the winter examination, with its record entry of 771 candidates, will go ahead. □

Green Paper

Council considered the College's draft response to the Government's paper on primary health care which has previously been discussed by the General Purposes Committee.

The paper emphasised the services that general practitioners could offer patients and which could be used as a basis for good practice. Unlike the Cumberlege Report the paper maintained that the functional unit was the practice team. The paper sought financial support equal to other medical disciplines for postgraduate activities.

The section on incentives was perhaps the most contentious since a few faculties had rejected this outright and other faculties stated that further work would be needed before such a system could be established. The College's policy linking practices' payments with quality of services was fully endorsed. The Good Practice Allowance was seen as one way of doing this but it was thought that its implementation will require further discussions. The paper explained that more money should be directed into practices in order for them to be able to provide a basic range of services as well as additional money relating to a performance sensitive contract.

The need for more resources for current activities and also for future development in order to improve services offered and to fund any incentives was emphasised. It was felt that the money would need to come from outside the NHS rather than from a distribution of current NHS resources.

It was agreed that GPC should consider these comments further and present a final draft to Council in December. It was also decided that GPC should prepare a draft response to the Cumberlege report for December Council. □

Childminder fees

Council approved the Patients' Liaison Group's request for childminder fees to be paid to lay members attending College sub-committees.

Previously when a lay member was nominated to the PLG the College paid travelling and subsistence expenses which were intended to ensure that voluntary members were not out of pocket as a result of their work for the College. But such expenses did not include childminder fees and when women with young children attended meetings away from home they sometimes incurred substantial childminder expenses. □

Awards

The President reported that Dr Geoffrey Marsh has been invited to deliver the 1987 James Mackenzie Lecture and that Dr Martin Lawrence has been invited to deliver the 1987 William Pickles Lecture.

Other awards announced were the George Abercrombie Award to Dr Keith Hodgkin, the Foundation Council Award to Professor David Metcalfe and the Baron Dr Ver Heyden de Lancy Memorial Award to Dr Ian Tait. It was agreed that these awards should be presented at the 1987 AGM. □

Irish Council

Council considered the recommendations from the *Working Party on the future of Irish Council* and decided that the three Republic of Ireland Faculties should amalgamate to form one republic of Ireland Faculty. Council also decided that the Irish Council should be dissolved.

In order to assist the newly formed Irish College of General Practitioners it was suggested that in accordance with the College's byelaws the Republic of Ireland should be recognised as an overseas faculty. This could be achieved by dissolving the existing Republic of Ireland Faculties and by a request from at least ten members of the RCGP resident in southern Ireland. □

Wonca 1986 Conference

Council was informed that letters of appreciation regarding the 1986 Wonca Conference are available for members to see when they visit the College library. □

Age concern guidelines

THIS month sees the launch of Age Concern's guidelines giving practical suggestions to help general practitioners in their day-to-day dealings with the elderly. With the number of people over the age of 75 increasing by nearly one million between now and the end of the century, primary health care teams must in the future expect increasing demands from older people.

In a simple and practical manner *Meeting the Needs of Older People* (see insert in this month's issue of the Journal) details the activities and attitudes that elderly people and their carers should be able to expect from general practitioners. Age Concern believes that general practitioners can play a pivotal role in making care of the elderly in the community a reality. The challenge to the medical profession is to add life to years and not years to life.

Two years ago Age Concern responded to the government's announcement that it intended to publish a green paper on primary health care by calling a meeting to look into the role played by general practitioners in catering for the needs of the elderly. The results of the consultations attended by representatives of the British Medical Association, Royal College of General Practitioners, British

General practitioners can play a pivotal role in making care of the elderly in the community a reality.

Geriatric Society, Royal College of Nursing and Age Concern were published this August in the policy paper *General Practitioners and the Needs of Older People*.

Sally Greengross, Deputy Director of Age Concern England, said: "Most elderly people visit a doctor at least once a year. General practitioners are in the best position to help elderly people and some are doing so in imaginative ways, but too often patients are let down because their

general practitioner doesn't understand their needs. We hope that the report and guidelines which give practical suggestions for every general practice will help doctors to give older people a better service."

On average 40 per cent of general practice consultations are made by the elderly and it is crucial that general practitioners should become experts in this field. But Age Concern are worried that some elderly people are experiencing problems in obtaining satisfactory general practitioner services and that some doctors are reluctant to treat them. They

Challenge is to add life to years and not years to life.

believe that this attitude may have been caused by deficiencies in undergraduate education which does not always recognise that treating elderly people can be professionally rewarding. The report criticises the lack of training for general practitioners in geriatrics and says that it could be improved at all levels — undergraduate, vocational and postgraduate. With new approaches and developments occurring all the time, Age Concern feel that refresher courses in the care of the elderly should be provided for general practitioners.

Studies have shown that some elderly patients experience physical and psychological barriers in seeking help and Age Concern say that the experience of visiting the doctor should be made as easy and pleasant as possible. The guidelines recommend that practices should be made accessible to disabled people and sited on ground floors and that appointment systems should be made as flexible as possible to prevent people from having to wait too long. They believe that general practitioners should be more willing to make home visits because these help demonstrate a doctor's interest and concern for a patient and can provide a con-

siderable amount of fresh clinical knowledge and understanding of the patient's personality.

The guidelines recommend that general practitioners should leave gaps in their appointment system so that more time can be made available for elderly people to explain their symptoms and for general practitioners to make necessary investigations and to explain the possible therapies.

They recommend that elderly patients can be better helped to understand how to take their medicines by general practitioners issuing clear and unambiguous directions, encouraging the use of memory aids, and keeping the number of different drugs taken to a minimum. Pharmacists could also help by using easy to open bottles with the directions on the labels written in large print.

The guidelines stress that the carers of elderly people, who are often pensioners themselves, need support. Information on the nature of the illness, its treatment and how it will progress should, with the patient's permission, be given to the carer. General practitioners can advise elderly people and their carers on the wide range of support services provided by the voluntary sector such as carers, support groups, social activities and nail cutting services. One way of providing this information, say Age Concern, might be in the form of practice booklets and information sheets.

General Practitioners and the Needs of Older People: a policy paper is available free. Send a 24p s.a.e. to: Information Department, Age Concern England, 60 Pitcairn Road, Mitcham, Surrey CR4 3LL.

American primary care

The North American Primary Care Research Group is holding its 15th annual meeting next year from May 17-20, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The deadline for submission of abstracts and papers is November 28, 1986. Further details can be obtained from Continuing Medical Education, University of Minnesota, Box 202 UMHC, 420 Delaware Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455. Telephone Carol Schagunn on (612) 626-5525.

Morbidity study

The third general practice based morbidity study (MSGP3) will be published this month. It involved continuous recording of all the morbidity data from consultations made by 300,000 patients visiting the 48 practices taking part from July 1981 to June 1982. The study will provide a comprehensive data base about patients and their illnesses which will be similar in format to the publication following the second National Morbidity Study of 1971/72.



Age Concern England/Nick Oakes

Unique chair

DR DENIS PEREIRA GRAY, the honorary editor of Royal College of General Practitioners Publications, has become the country's first ever professor of general practice at a postgraduate medical school.

Dr Pereira Gray, who takes up a personal chair in general practice at Exeter University this month, has been senior lecturer in charge of the University's department of general practice since it was established in 1973.

"We were very encouraged because we see the appointment as a recognition that general practice is on the move throughout the region," said Dr Pereira Gray.

Dr Pereira Gray has always been interested in vocational training and his book "Training for General Practice" was the first to be published on the subject. The department now caters for 36 vocational trainees.

The staff emphasize the importance of multidisciplinary education and this month sees the start of a new part-time MSc course in health care. Students include a general manager of a district health authority, general practitioners, health visitors, nurse managers, occupa-

tional therapists, practice managers, practice nurses and speech therapists.

"The purpose of the course is to encourage a high standard of patient care in general practice and the allied professions in a setting where colleagues in different professions can learn together and research methods affecting them all," said Dr Pereira Gray.

The department has been involved in educational, organizational and clinical research. They are currently undertaking a major study on the detection of cancer in general practice. The four senior lecturers together wrote *Running a Practice*, now in its third edition. The department has always tried to work closely with practising general practitioners and with the general practice organizations — both the College and the local medical committees/GMSC.

"I don't believe that you need all the trappings of a big medical school to teach and research general practice. Provided you have a full range of university disciplines supported by keen practices and a good district hospital then it is possible to set up exciting research," said Dr Pereira Gray. □

News editors

This month sees the launch of a new format for the College News which will be written by Dr Edwin Martin and Miss Janet Fricker. Dr Martin, the honorary editor of the News, represents the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Faculty on the Council of the Royal College of General Practitioners and is a member of the Communications Division of the RCGP. Dr Martin has been in general practice since 1971 and has also worked in Fiji, India and Saudi Arabia.

Janet Fricker, the new lay editor of this section, is also the College's assistant press officer. She has just completed a postgraduate diploma in journalism and has a Physiology degree. □

Select Committee

Dr Alastair Donald, a past chairman of Council of the College, has been appointed as the specialist adviser in general practice to the House of Commons Select Committee on the future of primary care.

The all party Committee, which is being chaired by Mrs Renee Short, will be receiving written and oral evidence from the principal primary health care bodies stimulated by the government's Green papers "Primary Health Care: an Agenda for Discussion" and the "Community Nursing Review".

"My job will be to use my professional knowledge to help the Committee to interpret the evidence," said Dr Donald, who will have to travel to the House of Commons every Wednesday from his Edinburgh home. □

New professor

DR PAUL FREELING, a member of Council and the College's Finance Committee, has recently been appointed to a newly established chair in general practice at St George's Hospital Medical School.

In 1976 Professor Freeling, who was then senior lecturer, established the first General Practice Teaching and Research Unit within the Medical School.

Professor Freeling was responsible for initiating a unique general practice curriculum in the undergraduate course. The course is unusual in having one attachment of 10 consecutive Tuesdays in the third and fourth year to allow an appreciation of the continuity of care, and a four week attachment in the final year where the student will be expected to be able to conduct independent although supervised surgeries.

The department has built up a network of more than 40 general practices in an "inner ring" around the medical school to take third and fourth year students, together with an "outer" ring of 62 practices in the South-West Thames region to take the fifth year students. Fifth years are sent out to each area in groups of 8 to 12

students so that they can be taught together by the local organiser who has a medical school appointment.

The network of undergraduate teaching practices affords a large population base for clinical studies. They have already involved many of these practices in their research, in particular with their work on depression, asthma, diabetes and hypertension. They are starting a new study to evaluate the effect on the well being of pre-terminal patients after being treated by co-ordinated nurses. The idea is for special nurses to co-ordinate services offered to these patients to make sure that they receive the full range on offer.

Professor Freeling has also been instrumental in developing general practice teaching in the pre clinical course. Second year students at George's are now being taught communication skills in local general practices. Professor Freeling believes that more time should be devoted to this as resources are made available. The department's *Work Book for Trainees*, which was published in 1983, has been widely used by both trainers and trainees. □

New director for Research Unit

Dr Ian Russell, the Journal's statistical adviser, has been appointed as director of the new Health Services Research Unit at Aberdeen University from January.

The aim of the new unit is to improve effectiveness and efficiency within the health service both locally and nationally. Dr Russell will be responsible for deciding which research projects are undertaken, the implementation of these projects and recruitment of staff. The new unit has a major commitment to implement the results of its studies; in particular clinicians who collaborate in joint research projects will be asked to abide by the results.

"I believe that you can only improve effectiveness and efficiency within the hospital sector by taking general practice fully into account," said Dr Russell.

Dr Russell will continue to work one day a week at Newcastle University where he is joint principal investigator of the Northern Regional Study of Standards and Performance in General Practice with Dr Donald Irvine and Dr Michael Parkin. □

Round Britain Race

ALL over Britain asthmatic children are taking part in a sponsored swim to raise money for asthma research.

Swimming champions David Wilkie and Adrian Moorhouse joined doctors from several London hospitals to launch the Round Britain Race at Dolphin Square Swimming Pool on September 16.

The Round Britain Race, which started with a swim in Aberdeen on September 18, is taking an east and west route and arriving back in London during Asthma Week on October 6. The asthma swim groups are being asked to swim the mileage to the next group on route in their local pools. Swimming is considered to be one of the best activities for asthmatics as the warm moist air is unlikely to lead to an asthma attack.

The Round Britain Race, which is sponsored by Fisons Pharmaceuticals, aims to raise public awareness of asthma and the need for correct management of the condition. Mr Hugh Faulkner, director of the Asthma Research Council, said that the challenge facing society was to educate doctors and patients in properly diagnosing and treating asthma.

"More research is needed. We want to know what causes the attack and what it is that enables certain drugs to help some people and not others," he said.

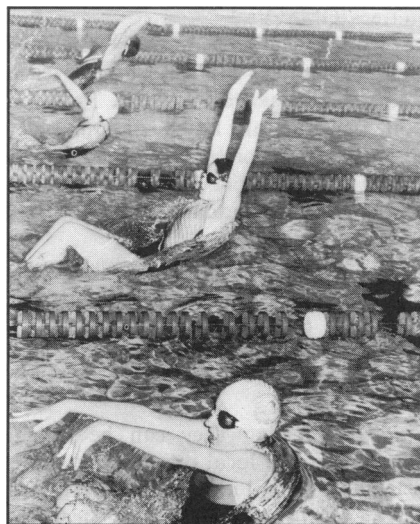
Despite more widespread medication for the condition, the death rate from asthma in the five-34 age group has risen by almost 5 per cent a year since 1974. About 2,000 people die of asthma every year in Britain.

Dr Martyn Partridge, consultant physician at Whipps Cross Hospital, said: "The increase in the death rate is just the tip of the iceberg. It reflects a much wider pool of people who suffer from the disease. We have to ask ourselves if we are using the right medicines or stepping in early enough."

Dr Partridge recently did an audit at his asthma clinic which revealed disturbing deficiencies in asthma education. A significant minority failed to understand the rationale behind their therapy and took inappropriate actions when the symptoms grew worse. Nearly half the patients on oral theophylline were unaware that increasing the dose when breathlessness increased could produce toxic blood levels and 15 per cent of patients did not even know that people could die from asthma.

The Asthma Research Council believes that general practitioners should be encouraged to check more closely on both the patient's use and understanding of their asthma medication.

The money raised will go towards funding the 44 research projects that the Asthma Research Council is currently supporting. □



Swimming is considered to be one of the best activities for asthmatics as the warm air in swimming pools is unlikely to lead to an asthma attack.

Research awards

When the popular Manchester general practitioner Dr Rudolf Friedlaender died suddenly in 1969, his patients and friends raised money to start a fund in his memory. Each year the Rudolf Friedlaender Memorial Fund gives awards of up to £1,000 to help finance doctors doing research on topics of interest and concern to general practitioners. Subjects covered in the past have included research on hypertension, the Pill, asthma and thyroid disorders.

Doctors interested in applying for the award this year should complete an application form by the end of October. These are available from Dr M.A. Casson, 599 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 9QT. □

Central Sales Office

From the 29 September the Publications Sales Office in Edinburgh will be closed and College publications will only be obtainable from the Central Sales Office at 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU. Publications will be available by post on a cash with order basis, cheques payable to R.C.G.P. Enterprises Ltd. Visa/Access accepted. Personal callers are welcome and the office is open Monday to Friday, 9.30 - 4.30.

- Epilepsy is the subject of the Communications Division's latest clinical information folder. The folder, which will be published this month, continues the theme set out in the previous folder on "Diabetes", that the general practitioner and his colleagues have a vital role to play in the management of chronic diseases. A booklet entitled *Epilepsy — A General Practice Problem* by Dr Edwin Martin is enclosed in the folder and describes the steps that are necessary to diagnose and manage patients suffering from the disease. The booklet indicates how and when to make use of the skills of the specialist but firmly places the burden of caring for the patient on the primary care team. The folders are priced at £5 to members and £6 to non-members (including postage and packing in the UK). They can be ordered from the Central Sales Office.

- This year's College Christmas card depicts a line drawing of the Princes Gate building. The cards will be on sale at the AGM and are also available by post from the Central Sales Office.

- The College have arranged with Mayor, Sworder & Company Ltd., one of the City's longest established wine merchants, to make bottles of claret carrying the College's crest available to members. The claret is Claret de Mestrezat, which is the top non vintage blend of Negociant Mestrezat and is bottled in Bordeaux. Cases of College claret are available from the Central Sales Office at a cost of £40 including postage and packing. □

Birthday celebration

IN September the Health Visitors' Association (HVA) celebrated its 90th birthday with the launch of a special exhibition at the House of Commons which traces major developments in the profession's growth.

The HVA was started in 1896 by seven women sanitary inspectors who visited women employed in factories, workshops and outworkers' premises. The Association came into being at a time when women's groups were fighting for the vote. It pressed for equal pay and better conditions for women and backed the suffragette movement. HVA pioneer Amy Sayle led the way for the association to become a trade union and it is now among

the oldest TUC health unions with the highest proportion of female members. It is one of the few unions with a woman secretary and expanding membership.

The exhibition contains much original material covering areas as diverse as the hand-written minute regarding the vote on TUC affiliation in 1924, through to a message of greeting from Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother at the holding of one of the first set of education courses after World War Two.

The exhibition will be travelling around the country and can be seen at health centres, anniversary dinners and museums throughout October, November and December. □

College treasures

THE Royal College of General Practitioners has just discovered that it is sitting on an extremely valuable Museum and Archive collection.

In July a firm of auctioneers undertook a valuation of the Museum collection for insurance purposes, and estimated that it was worth nearly £60,000.

From the beginning the College's Foundation Council was quick to realise the importance of collecting, preserving and displaying rare items that related to the history of general practice.

In 1959 Dr Peter Thomas was appointed Honorary Curator of the Museum after Dr John Horder had noticed two articles he had written in the *Journal* on ancient surgical instruments.

Dr Thomas said: "As a boy I always liked history and was sorry when I had to give it up to do Higher School Certificate. This job has been an excellent means of combining my principal interests — history and medicine."

Over the years appeals by the College for objects of historic interest have led to a generous response from members. When the College was 25 years old the collection amounted to nearly 500 items.

"Items like the rolled gold eyelid retractor and the pre 1900 brass bladder syringe sound as though they're straight out of a medieval torture chamber."

The basement at Princes Gate contains a wealth of fascinating material including surgical and medical instruments, old text books, prescription books, qualifying certificates and drug jars. Items like the rolled gold eyelid retractor and the pre 1900 brass bladder syringe sound as though they're straight out of a medieval torture chamber.

Dr Thomas thinks that the pièce de résistance of the collection is the 18th century Culpeper-type microscope which has just been valued at £7,000. Dr Thomas also pointed out a Dudgeon sphygmograph — a 19th Century instrument used for examining variations in the pulse — and the Mackenzie polygraph — which was used in the early part of this century to make a direct examination of heart rhythm —, as being items of considerable medical interest.

"These instruments demonstrate the evolution of scientific instruments in the study of the heart and blood vessels", he explained.

The Wellcome Historical Medical Museum gave the College five show cases which have enabled Dr Thomas to display objects attractively at Princes Gate under secure conditions for all to see. One display that has met with considerable interest contains memorabilia that belonged to Dr William Pickles, the first President

of the College. When Dr Pickles died in 1969 his daughter, Mrs. Patricia Clayton, donated her father's stethoscope, thermometer, certificates of honorary degrees, medals and the specimen diary he took on his rounds to the College. These items make a unique record of the work of this remarkable Wensleydale general practitioner.

At the last meeting of the Communications Division Executive it was agreed that the displays could be expanded and that cases could be introduced into the Common Room. For Mrs Sally Irvine, the General Administrator (and a Cambridge historian), and Miss Margaret Hammond, the Library Advisor, this was the result of several years' lobbying for better access to the College's collection.

The job of arranging the display cabinet contents has fallen to Miss Anne Darlington who was originally brought in to help with the Archives.

Miss Darlington is fascinated by the way medicine and art have influenced each other throughout history. She is now studying part-time for a PHD on the relationship between art and anatomy at London University's Institute of Education.

"My work at the College fits in very well with my research because both are about aesthetics and the practical issues of medicine," said Miss Darlington.

A few years ago Dr Thomas started a scheme to lend College members some of the less valuable pieces for talks and exhibitions at health centres. This was on the proviso that borrowers took sole responsibility for items in their care. Dr Thomas laments the fact that only one general

practitioner has so far taken advantage of the scheme and thinks that this is symptomatic of the lack of interest shown by doctors in history.

"The subject of medical history should be pushed more at the undergraduate level because you can not hope to understand the present and future unless you have a thorough grounding in the past," said Dr Thomas.

"Medical history should be pushed more at the undergraduate level because you can't hope to understand the present and future unless you have a thorough grounding in the past."

Dr Horder was appointed as the College's first Archivist in 1956. In the beginning chairman and honorary secretaries of central and faculty committees were asked to submit material when they were ready to discard it.

The rightness of the College's decision to collect archives early on was confirmed by a comment of the Royal College of Physician's Librarian Mr L.E. Payne who said that he deeply regretted that his College had not established a collection of archives formally until long after its foundation.

Dr Irvine Loudon, a former general practitioner who now has a fellowship at the Oxford Wellcome History of Medicine Unit, is the current College Archivist. He defines archives as everything that happened the day before yesterday.

"When I took over it was totally disorganised with a large number of records scattered about the College. It was a question of defining exactly what an Archive was and creating a catalogue," said Dr Loudon. He was fortunate enough to meet Miss Darlington through a History of Medicine contact. "She's done a simply marvellous job putting the Archives into order," he said.

Dr Loudon believes that the most interesting and important Archives are the records of the College's foundation and the preceding events. "They are important because of the historical light they throw on general practice," he said.

Two other important sources of archive material are the bound volumes of the minutes of Council and Committees that have been kept since 1953.

Miss Darlington is responsible for making sure that the items are kept in good order so that they don't just decay. Papers are stored in acid free boxes and the paper clips are removed so that there is no risk from rusting. "They need to be kept in quite a warmish room, otherwise the paper would just go mouldy," she said.

Next month sees the start of a new series in the *Journal* highlighting items of interest from the College's Museum and Archive collections. □



Miss Anne Darlington, the Assistant Curator, arranging a Museum display in one of the College's show cases.

EMBASSY SIEGE

College staff remember the day the terrorists took over 16 Princes Gate and Janet Fricker finds out what's been happening since.

ONLY a wall separates the Royal College of General Practitioners from the charred remains of the Iranian Embassy, yet the College came through the six day siege in 1980 virtually unscathed. But six years later the problem over who should take responsibility for the ruin has still not been decided.

Mr Dennis Pugh, the College's Consultant Architect, said: "The difficulties we have had associated with the condition of the Iranian property read like a Whitehall farce."

Protracted negotiations between the solicitors acting for the Iranians, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Westminster City Council and the College have yet to resolve the issue of who is responsible for the 16 Princes Gate site.

Mrs Janet Smith, the President's Secretary, remembers April 30 1980 as if it were yesterday: "The first indication that anything might be wrong was the sound of shouting, but people were always standing outside the Embassy so I thought it was just another demonstration. Then I looked out of the window and said to the other 'Don't look now, but there are policemen running all over the garden with guns. It was some minutes before any of them would believe me.'"

"At the slightest disturbance terrorists stuck their guns out of the window."

Mr Ron Patrick, the College Postman, was sorting letters at the front of the College when he saw, through a window, policemen opening a car boot and getting out guns and bullet proof jackets. "I opened the front door to see what was happening and was told smartly to 'get in'," he said.

Dr Denis Pereira Gray was in a meeting discussing important issues like where Dr Simon Barley, the editor-designate of the Journal, should get his typewriter. "We heard muffled sounds like a car exhaust, but no one appeared at all bothered so we just carried on with the meeting," he said.

After finishing they went downstairs to discover policemen rushing through the ground floor carrying guns and taking up marksmen's positions on the terrace.

Gradually the realization dawned that a group of terrorists had taken over the Iranian Embassy next door at gun point and were holding 26 people hostage.

The gunmen were fighting for local autonomy of a little known region of Iran known as Khuzestan. After the Second World War the Khuzestanis, who by a strange quirk of history are Arabs, tried to throw off Persian rule and join Iraq. However an area which was exporting over five million barrels of oil a day — about one-tenth of the world's oil trade — was

"Policemen were rushing through the hall and taking up marksmen's positions on the terrace."

far too valuable an asset for Iran to consider giving up. The Khuzestanis remained a suppressed and downtrodden minority until a strike by the oil workers in 1978 helped bring the Shah to his knees and usher in the Islamic revolution. But the Ayatollah also had no intention of seeing the Islamic state carved up by ethnic freedom groups.

London with its ill-defended embassies, large Middle Eastern population and its flourishing Arabic Press provided an ideal target for what really amounted to a publicity stunt.

Later that afternoon when everything had quietened down the staff were called

together and told that they would be allowed to leave from the basement steps. A policeman received the message that all was clear and the staff were escorted out in twos. They were told to walk by the hedge at the eastern side of the College and not to look back because they were still in the range of the terrorists, who stuck their guns out of the window at the slightest disturbance. "We had to creep out, then the policeman said 'Run like hell' so we did," said Mrs Smith.

Staff were told to ring in each day to see if they were required and later the College set up a temporary office at the Auditors, Messrs. Price Waterhouse, for telephone calls.

Mr James Wood, the General Administrator and his assistant Mr Dick Lloyd-Williams took it in turns to look after the College for the duration of the siege.

"On the second day the SAS arrived and we had to show them the routes over the roof and where to put their listening devices," said Mr Wood.

The SAS were billeted in the College. The officers occupied the bedrooms and the soldiers set up a dormitory in the Long Room. "They were briefed every two hours and spent the rest of their time sleeping. There were alerts every time the Iranians made any sort of move. It took them just ten minutes to be ready for action with all their equipment buckled on," said Mr Wood.

Mr Wood remembers the efficiency and enthusiasm of the SAS troop. "They behaved impeccably and cleared everything up before they went," he said.

The siege ended with the SAS launching their assault on the Embassy from the College building. A stun grenade caused the fire which gutted the Embassy building, but apart from having windows blown in and the basement flooded by water from the firemen's hoses, the College suffered amazingly little damage. We are still counting our blessings that the SAS did not decide to blast their way into the Embassy through our walls.

The College soon became concerned about the continual deterioration of the



The SAS camping out in the College's Long Room during the siege.



The dramatic end to the Embassy siege.

adjoining property and the adverse effect this was having on the wall it shared with the Embassy. The roof of the Embassy had been destroyed in the fire and the whole structure of the building was now exposed to the elements.

In some parts of the College the plaster came off the walls from damp working its way through from the derelict building. Miss Mary Anne Piggott's office in the Communication Division was badly affected and had to have the plaster taken off and the walls relined.

"The party wall between the two properties had become an external wall and was being exposed to the weather in a way it was never built for," said Mr Pugh. "When a building in a terrace is removed you lose heat insulation and this can cause decorative damage from damp penetration?"

The problem of who should pay for repairs to the Embassy building has been further complicated by mob attacks on British premises in Iran. A Foreign and Commonwealth Office spokesman said: "We have had a number of discussions with the Iranian authorities and Westminster City Council with a view to reaching a negotiated settlement over compensation for damage to Iranian diplomatic premises at 16 Princes Gate and to British diplomatic and other property in Iran."

It now seems likely that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be prepared to make an ex gratia settlement for damage to the Iranian Embassy provided the claim for damage to British property in Iran is settled at the same time.

The situation has inevitably brought the College financial problems. "We have had to put aside money for the consequential costs at such time as the building is restored. This has meant that there is dead money lying around which we can't use for any other purpose," said the College's Honorary Treasurer Dr Douglas Garvie.

Progress was fraught with difficulties. The Iranian authorities refused to allow the College architects and surveyors access

to the Embassy site to estimate the work that was required to safeguard the College's property. The Iranians' frequent response to queries was: "We have reported to Tehran and must await their instructions." These naturally took a long time coming.

The next problem after the College had finally got permission to enter the building was whether insurance companies would cover staff on land that was not technically British. Under the Vienna Convention the buildings at 16 Princes Gate no longer constitute diplomatic premises because they are not occupied, but the land may still be regarded as Iranian soil.

The rubble which had been left in the Embassy was fast becoming a public health problem. "The building was full of filthy rubbish and cats, and we all knew what they were living on," said Mr Pugh. Something obviously had to be done. In May 1985 after constant pressure from the College, contractors entered the premises after instructions from the Iranians. They did not remove the rubbish but merely hid it within the building.



The ruin of the Iranian Embassy building as it stands today.

By law councils are required to bear the cost of looking after buildings in a dangerous state if the owners refuse to take responsibility. So last July Westminster City Council had to order its refuse collectors to remove the rubbish. The stench was so bad that they were forced to wear breathing masks to remove the 15 tonnes of putrefying rubbish that had accumulated over the years.

In November last year Westminster City Council finally agreed to construct a temporary roof over the Iranian Embassy in an attempt to protect the College's building from further decay. The plan was that the roof should be made of cast iron with a surrounding skirting to prevent the rain from falling down the side.

Then in January this year Westminster City Council took the Iranian Government to Court in an attempt to recover the £200,000 which had been spent on essential maintenance work to the Embassy. But the Judge ruled that the council could not pursue its claim because of Iran's refusal to accept official notice of the proceedings. The council had hoped to recover its costs by registering land charges

"The policeman said 'run like hell' so we did."

against the property which would have prevented the Iranians from disposing of the property until the charges were paid. This needed the Courts approval because Iran claimed that the premises were still covered by diplomatic immunity.

The contractors started work on the roof in December and said that it would be completed by the end of June, but no one has been anywhere near the site for the last four months and the roof is not properly sealed.

"We still only have three-quarters of a roof on 16 Princes Gate, which has simply created a wind-tunnel and a trap for poor weather," said Mrs Sally Irvine, the College's General Administrator.

Another problem in this on going saga is that the contractors have not properly secured the scaffold boards.

"A scaffold board blew down the other day and broke one of the seats on the terrace. We were lucky that no one was sitting there because they could have been killed," said Mrs Irvine.

No one seems quite sure why the contractors downed tools over four months ago without completing the job. Some people have heard rumours that the Iranians are not allowing the contractors back on the premises.

Mr Pugh is afraid that he will have another winter on his hands before the work is finished.

"Once the roof is complete it should give us temporary protection from the elements, but this still won't solve the problem of insulation loss. What we really need is a more permanent solution," said Mr Pugh. □

HONG KONG 1987

VIP International Conference Services are offering College members the exciting opportunity of attending the Asia Pacific Region's Combined Colleges Meeting of the World Organisation of National Colleges, Academies and Academic Associations of General Practitioners/Family Physicians (WONCA) in Hong Kong next September, and to afterwards go on a tour of China.

The conference, hosted by the Hong Kong College of General Practice, plans to explore possible applications of the 'western' concept of health care in different geographical, cultural and socio-economic settings. This is being held from the 5 to 9 September at the Furama International Hotel and the adjacent City Hall Complex.

Dr Marshall Marinker will open the conference by addressing the question of whether there is a scientific and ethical basis for general practice which holds for all societies and cultures.

Then, at daily plenary sessions a panel of invited speakers will be presenting papers on topics ranging from geographic and economic frontiers to 'The Changing Face and Stable Core of Family Medicine'. Workshops relating to these sessions will afterwards be co-ordinated by experts and the deliberations and conclusions published in daily news bulletins.

Opportunities will be made available for original contributions and discussions relating to areas of special interest such as undergraduate teaching, and the use of computer technology in general practice. Dr Jack Norell, President of the British Balint Society, said that he will be talking about vocational training, professional standards and doctor/patient relationships.

Dr Douglas Garvie, who is co-ordinating the British trip, said: "After the success of the conference at the Barbican I would expect that College members are now

much more aware of WONCA itself and the value of the conferences it runs. This is reflected in the fact that close on 100 people have so far expressed an interest in attending the Hong Kong Conference."

Tourists programmes, which offer an exciting and informative view of the life and culture of Hong Kong and its people, are being scheduled for those accompanying conference delegates. A tour round the island including a visit to Stanley market (famous for its designer fashions), a stop at Victoria Park above the busy harbour, and a morning cruise on the South China Sea have been planned. Optional tours such as a visit to the monastery high in the hills on Lantau Island and a cruise to Cheung Chau Islands to see the fishing community with their junks and sampans can be booked on arrival in Hong Kong.

To make sure College members get the most out of their trip to the Far East, VIP are arranging a special post conference tour of China. The six day visit to the mainland will include a visit to Shanghai, the Summer Palace, the Great Wall and the Ming Tomb — burial place of 13 Emperors of the Ming Dynasty. On the return flight stop-overs in Bangkok, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia and the romantic island of Bali can be arranged.

Ms Sarah Rhodes, VIP's conference travel consultant, said: "As long as people travel out with the group we can easily vary their itinerary and will happily give individual quotations for the tour."

Approximate prices for the basic conference package, including flight, bed and breakfast and social events, start at £717.00. It is estimated the cost of the touring package will be from £1,542.

Further details of the tours can be obtained by writing to VIP International Conference Services at 42 North Audley Street, London W1A 4PY, or by telephoning 01 629 2243. □



Dr Michael Varnam, Chairman of the Education Division, who organised the Symposium.

ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM

THE Royal College of General Practitioners annual symposium in November aims to produce guidelines on important areas like terminal illness, paediatric surveillance, clinical dependency and treatment of asthma. The College hopes that this will form a major contribution to its initiative on quality in care.

The well known television personality Miss Esther Rantzen will open the conference by providing a direct challenge to general practitioners to improve the services they offer patients. Miss Rantzen's consumer watchdog programme 'That's Life' has done a good deal on the quality of medical care and she has a particular interest in child health.

The 120 doctors attending the symposium are being asked to do some homework before and examine their own care of patients in two of the areas discussed.

They are hoping to answer the question of how primary health care teams can help the terminally ill. They want general practitioners to recognise their own individual responsibilities for implementing child care services in the community and to look into ways that the time taken to diagnose asthma can be reduced. They will also be looking at how the general practitioner can help patients with chemical dependencies.

At the end of the morning and afternoon sessions four distinguished general practitioners will produce a summarised statement on the work of each of the groups. All participants will receive expert commentaries on their faculty work, individual preparation and group discussions. In answer to each of the four questions the four rapporteurs will produce summarised statements for consideration by Council in December.

"This year we are developing participation so that general practitioners will be able to define exactly what they feel they should be offering patients rather than a small and select group at Princes Gate telling them what to do," said Dr. Michael Varnam, Chairman of the Education Division, who is running the symposium.

A limited number of places are still available for the one day symposium which will be held on Friday 14 November at the Barbican. Any one interested should contact Dr Varnam via the Education Division at Princes Gate. □

