

The College: academic or political?

J.S. MCCORMICK, FRCPI, FRCGP, FFCM

D.J.G. BAIN, MD, FRCGP

D.H.H. METCALFE, FRCGP, MFCM

IT may well be that this contribution will be perceived as the burbling of ancients, for collectively we have an experience of College Council and some of its offices which extends to almost a quarter of a century. Yet it is this experience and the commitment it represents that has prompted the effort to set something down on paper about the College, its role and its future direction.

We are concerned lest this piece is seen as 'sour grapes' or a plaintive call for a return to 'the good old days'. It is neither. We are devoted to the College and have no notion of a College in crisis or a College which has gone seriously astray but we are concerned that its future should be as distinguished as its past. We hope that setting down these ideas may stimulate debate.

The role of the College

The College is torn between two sets of irreconcilable pressures. The first is between the College as an academic body and the College as a political force or even a political organization. The second is between the College as an elite club and the College as the accrediting body for all general practitioners, representing the whole of the discipline. The first of these conflicts has been present from almost the earliest days, the second is relatively recent. They are not entirely discrete, as those who are enthusiastic about the academic function may not be too afraid of the criticism of elitism and those who see it representing the profession may wish it to have political muscle. They also overlap in that the achievements of the College in its early days, although originally spearheaded by a relatively few enthusiastic members, were later translated into political reality.

The College as an academic body

The university has been described as an institution dedicated to the pursuit of excellence and the search for truth. It is also a function of the university to provide a resource for learning. These attributes should also distinguish the College from the British Medical Association (BMA). Anyone setting out to describe the College would almost certainly begin by stating that it is an academic body. In College Council this statement is usually made in order to discourage somebody from doing or saying something which would upset the General Medical Services Committee of the BMA. It is relatively unusual for it to be used in the positive sense: that because we are an academic body we should be doing this or that. What then does it mean to state that the College is an academic body, or what should it mean? It means above all a respect for and searching for truth. It is perhaps strange that in these islands 'academic' has pejorative

overtones: overtones of being distanced from reality, of the ivory tower, of being impractical, not part of the real world and therefore irrelevant.

The search for truth begins by accepting the reality and extent of ignorance. The practical consequence for the College is that it should eschew making unsubstantiated comment, claiming 'truths' which are unsupported. There is a temptation for the College to express views on a wide range of subjects which represent consensus and accepted wisdom rather than critical appraisal of available evidence. Truth is unlikely to be determined by ballot. Sometimes there is no evidence, sometimes there is a conflict as to how the available evidence should be interpreted. Yet the College is often under pressure to have and to express a view and as a general rule it is not seen as acceptable to Council, or the membership at large, that the College should remain silent.

The analogy with the university breaks down at this point. A university does not have a corporate view about the desirability of this or that course of action, unless it concerns the institution itself. Individual members have views but the university simply provides an environment and has, as a rule, considerable tolerance towards deviance.

In some respects the College, like the discipline of general practice, is demand responsive. Institutions, departments of state and other bodies ask the College for views and responses to their ideas. This provides a distraction from being able to devote time and energy to preparing well-researched documents and statements. There has always been a distinction made between College documents (that is statements endorsed by the College, usually with policy consequences) and College publications. In recent times it has made what seemed hasty responses to the problems of deputizing services and the restricted list of drugs. It is at least arguable that the College got it wrong on both occasions but this is not what really matters. What matters is that the responses did not stress our relative ignorance and the need for firm data before any useful response could be made: even existing evidence was inadequately reviewed.

Progress in general practice often seems to be held up because we are trapped in a set of assumptions — for example about time, about being demand led, about the nature of diagnosis — that have not been rigorously examined. The extraordinary variability in general practice suggests that we are not all constrained by immutable factors: some seem to have escaped constraint and to have survived. The College should be examining these assumptions and if they do not stand up to scrutiny, setting out to destroy them.

If the College is to justify its academic status, it should, to a greater extent than at present, encourage and sometimes commission work which is likely to make a contribution to our knowledge and understanding but the consequences of which may be uncomfortable or controversial. The number of such statements needs to grow and to become more catholic in scope, not neglecting the social sciences. If the College ceases to cultivate activity it can be nothing more than an association of doctors, in some ways not readily distinguishable from the BMA.

The College and the universities

In its early days the College was much concerned with the lack of undergraduate education in our discipline. Its advocacy of the need for academic departments and its evidence to the Royal Commission on Medical Education¹ probably contributed to

J.S. McCormick, Professor of Community Health, University of Dublin; D.J.G. Bain, Professor of Primary Medical Care, University of Southampton; D.H.H. Metcalfe, Professor of General Practice, University of Manchester.

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the progress which has been made. Nonetheless, progress seems to have come to a standstill and in some places seems to be regressing. At times of economic stringency, poor and relatively under-resourced departments are likely to bear the brunt of cuts. In more recent years, despite the College's support for the Mackenzie report² and its response to the government's green paper,³ concern for undergraduate education seems to have diminished.

To some extent this relative neglect may represent the strange history of postgraduate education in medicine in these islands which, for historical reasons has made the royal colleges rather than the universities the examining and hence the standard setting bodies in postgraduate education. It may be that the proper concern and involvement with vocational training and the examination has diverted attention away from the needs of undergraduates and the possible role of the academic departments in relation to postgraduates. It is fair to say that tension between the academics and what are, perhaps perversely, described as the practising profession, is not peculiar to our College but is also apparent in other places.

The College should seek an increasing involvement with medical schools and demonstrate its concern for the whole of university education in these difficult times.

Elite or representative?

In the early days the relatively small membership allowed the College to express views which were non-normative and the College lived fairly comfortably with the accusation of elitism. Many of these views, particularly in relation to education, subsequently became the conventional wisdom and were translated into political reality. Too much emphasis on being representative stifles innovation and imagination.

The tension between elitism and representativeness is also reflected in the tension between the College as an academic body and a political force. As an academic body it may be obliged to express views which are at variance with those of many of its members: if it is to be political, it must be governed by consensus. Should the College seek to represent the majority view or should it be prepared to express views which are at the moment not generally accepted, controversial or seen as threatening present practice. Should the College lead or follow?

The faculties

Our founding fathers established a faculty system which is unique among royal colleges and on many occasions in Council the cry has been heard, 'We must consult the faculties'. These consultations were seldom fruitful as the large size of faculties, both in terms of geography and numbers, did not allow a mechanism for proper consultation. In reality the faculty board or the faculty secretary either made, or often did not, some sort of response.

One of the major outstanding issues facing the College is the future and function of the faculties. The faculty system was established in order that the ordinary member would be directly involved in the activities of the College in a regular and ongoing way. Our College was to be different from the others in that membership was more than the passive acceptance of belonging as a result of passing the appropriate examination. Now that the examination is firmly established as part of the normal route to a principalship, how many of our members retain or wish to cultivate identification with the College and wish to work for its success? Attendance at major College functions, such as the Annual General Meeting, or competition for places on Council would suggest that such involvement is still a minority activity.

Striking the balance

We would argue that the College has gone down the road of being political and representative at the expense of being elite and academic and by so doing may forfeit intellectual leadership. Structures and reality deny the possibility of making an either/or choice. It is more a matter of emphasis and a sense of direction rather than choosing between stark alternatives. John Fry, in his thoughtful contribution to a recent news section of the *Journal*, did more than hint at the problem but failed in a way to emphasize the difficulties of resolving the tension.⁴ He states at the beginning of his penultimate paragraph, 'There is no place for an elitist College', and at the end of the same paragraph, 'There is no place for a College that is not prepared to state the truth even if it upsets some long held views and traditions'.

What could be done to get the balance right? First, the College must be brave. Bravery can be tempered by publishing much more material under its aegis but not with its imprimatur. If the reader does not make that distinction it does not really matter, but in this way new ideas, provided that they are supported by evidence, can bring credit to the College and allow it to be seen as a leader in its discipline. Council does not and cannot within itself provide the knowledge and expertise which is theoretically available. It should not hesitate to involve others in its working parties and the like. Most people are flattered to be invited to contribute and will often willingly accede to a request for help. This activity could be extended to commissioning research which attempts to answer important questions. Generally the College has supported research in indirect ways, it may be time for a more direct involvement. Thirdly, as is already happening, faculties must be resourced to provide a focus for local activity and initiatives. This could prove expensive as the size of existing faculties is so large that they will need to be divided into smaller and more accessible units.

Conclusion

We believe that the problems surrounding the tension between the College as an academic body and as a political and representative organization must be addressed if the College is to face the future with confidence. This paper is to stimulate a debate, which we see as necessary to the future of the College which has given us and many others so much both individually and collectively.

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Address for correspondence

Professor J.S. McCormick, Department of Community Health, University of Dublin, 196 Pearse Street, Dublin 2, Republic of Ireland.