

Punitive measures belong to yesterday and have no part to play in professional relationships.

College please note.

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Sir,

It is difficult to understand how Dr Jamie Bahrami (Letters, July *Journal*, p.327) can allude to events in the north east Thames region as a 'huge leap forward' in vocational training. The report of the Joint Committee on Postgraduate Training for General Practice, published in February 1988, indicates that a total of six trainees in the UK had been refused certificates. This almost certainly means that all the trainees in the north east Thames region received certificates but when a minority of a sample of 23 trainers out of a total of 175 were defined as unsatisfactory all trainers came under the ban. The crucial matter is trainee performance and trainees are being banned from an important assessment, the MRCGP examination, which would identify the undertrained.

In spite of substantial evidence of actual improvements in the region, including a better calibre of young doctors recruited, the region has been rewarded with an incursion by the joint committee which has demoralized instead of leading and which now threatens to create a manpower blight.

The joint committee realized that in exercising its legal regulatory function it cannot safeguard standards of entry to general practice and that its expensive bureaucracy is only a rubber stamp. It was therefore tempted into exercising powers it did not possess and imposed a meaningless measure — the withdrawal of recognition of training from a whole region. It is likely that had this been challenged in the high court, the joint committee would have been seen to be acting in excess of its powers. It is noteworthy that during the whole of this episode the joint committee has never indicated that it would refuse applications for certificates from trainees who complete general practice posts in the region during any period.

A major problem caused by the joint committee is that it has summarily removed the rights of trainers to appeal against the ban and of trainees to sit the MRCGP examination, as the Royal College of General Practitioners felt compelled to act in concert with the joint committee. No

training or examination system for teachers and trainees is enhanced by being deprived of natural justice. If this is judged a 'leap forward' then the cost is excessive indeed.

The joint committee has revealed that its regulatory function in issuing certificates has resulted in a failure in maintaining standards. This must make one wonder about its future and whether the public should be asked to continue to fund it. Why should general practice not now change to an examination system as used by the remainder of the profession? Providing that the examining body behaves like the senior royal colleges in promoting a system that is dependable, efficient, fair, and accessible to all who qualify regardless of region, then we might yet see a major leap forward in the history of vocational training.

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Fellowship of the College

Sir,

Fellowship was given no defined function when it was started, and it is not surprising that now, as it nears its twenty-first birthday, there should be growing confusion as to its further development.

With the growth of the College, the committee on fellowship (six members appointed from council, six elected from the fellows, and chaired by the president) can no longer hope to assess proposals from personal knowledge as was attempted initially. There are differences in the manner in which proposal forms are completed and, indeed, in the way fellowship is perceived by the different faculties — in the Sheffield faculty 6% of members are fellows but in south east Wales the figure is 18%. Confusion reigns as to whether fellowship should be conferred, serving identified local or national needs of the College, or become a self-sought accolade, a pass in a further examination, in the hope that others regard this as standard setting.

I was an elected member of the committee on fellowship during three years in which it tried to resolve this confusion. Early this year the committee came to a unanimous view as to the function of the fellowship, and as to the organizational changes required to mend the existing machinery. At the same time, and with no regard for normal constitutional practice, the College council superseded the position of its standing committee by presenting for consideration a different kind of fellowship to the membership division.

This authority was subsequently transferred to the education division and, more recently again, to a working group chaired by the College deputy vice-chairman.

It may be that council has been misled by its general purposes committee in agreeing these parallel developments and in supporting a change of function from one in which varied individual talents serve the broad needs of the College in a decentralized fashion to one in which a narrower, uniform and elitist centrally-determined educational purpose is being served.

Two matters remain to be agreed — a definition of the function of fellowship and a decision as to the body to which the College will entrust management of the fellowship scheme. For the first of these, the committee on fellowship accepted that the purpose of fellowship was to strengthen the College in the achievement of its object and in the fulfilment of its responsibilities. This purpose is accomplished by conferring fellowship on members who have served the College particularly well in the pursuit of its objectives. Thus 'distinguished', such members may have an increased opportunity to contribute and, by knowing that they have the respect of their peers, they may be encouraged to embrace further opportunities. For the second matter, the committee on fellowship has produced a practicable plan which includes decentralized peer review within faculties, and continuing examination of the integrity of the scheme as consensus develops the function of fellowship. At different times council has already approved several parts of this plan and the committee on fellowship, as a body independent of the central divisional structure of the College and answerable directly to council, should be made responsible.

The committee on fellowship plan could be introduced now and, decentralized in operation, it would revitalize fellowship to the benefit of the College. The alternative — awaiting the outcome of interminable efforts to agree how to measure something which is constantly changing — will mean the continuing deterioration of fellowship until it becomes an object of ridicule.

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MRCGP examination

Sir,

It was with considerable disquiet that we read the press reports of the 'overwhelming vote' taken by 57 course organizers at