

Undergraduate departments of general practice: substance or symbolic shadow?

At its inception and throughout the early 1950s, the College placed the furthering of undergraduate education among its top priorities. At that time, UK medical education was wholly hospital-based; it was true that here and there might be discerned a few attempts to 'expose' medical students to the service aspects of general practice, sometimes in such a clandestine manner as to merit the term 'indecent'. Now all that has changed, as is made plain by the College's latest occasional paper — *The contribution of academic practice to undergraduate medical education* — a remarkable statistical and narrative account of the functions and structures of university departments of general practice in the UK and Ireland by Professor Fraser and Dr Preston-Whyte. With the listing of 18 professors of general practice among other full-time and part-time staff, imposing arrays of educational objectives, and records of variable but not insubstantial amounts of curriculum time, the document makes impressive reading. There is no doubt about the achievement of much that the College, in its early days, had pressed for.

Yet reading between the lines of *Occasional paper 42* and the Mackenzie report¹ published in 1986, there are indications that all is not well on the academic front. No other major clinical university department is expected to function without a 'critical mass' of core staff, yet this lack is apparently the norm for general practice. Even departments which achieve this 'critical mass' of staff are not secure. The department in Aberdeen, a pioneer in this field, has been allowed to shrink to a small fraction of its previous strength. No department of general practice can survive without its cadre of National Health Service general practitioner tutors (2200 in all), the great majority of whom perform time-consuming sophisticated teaching tasks — yet we read of some being rewarded by book tokens (if they are accorded any recognition at all). Why is this allowed to happen? The general public, the government and medical students all appear to recognize the crucial importance of general practice in the health care system in this country. However, the failure of many medical schools to include general practice in the undergraduate final examinations is a sign that our discipline is not yet similarly valued by other specialists.

Medical schools, beset on the one hand by cuts in the university budgets and on the other by NHS 'rationalizations', appear to give low priority to departments of general practice. The liberalism and relative affluence of the 1950s and 1960s saw the birth of many departments. Universities are now experiencing the austerity of the 1980s, an environment which is likely to continue into the 1990s and beyond.

The evidence suggests that left to their own devices universities lack the political will to ensure that academic general practice is adequately resourced. They need to be assisted towards a fuller recognition of the value of these departments and the great contribution made by the NHS teaching practices. Having stimulated the foundation of academic departments of general practice, the College now has a role in ensuring their future viability. At faculty level, for example, boards could invite medical schools to review ways in which general practitioners can support and improve the undergraduate programme and identify problems their local department is experiencing and take appropriate corporate action. Centrally, close links between the

College, the Association of University Teachers of General Practice and the General Medical Services Committee are necessary for maintaining and strengthening academic general practice. This may help to ensure that a job half done becomes a job well done and that the symbolic shadow becomes something of true substance.

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Reference

1. Howie JGR, Hannay DR, Stevenson JSK. *General practice in the medical schools of the United Kingdom — 1986. The Mackenzie report*. Edinburgh: University Department of General Practice, 1986.

The contribution of academic general practice to undergraduate medical education, Occasional paper 42 is available from the Central Sales Office, Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU, price £6.50, including postage. Cheques should be made payable to RCGP Enterprises Ltd. Access and Visa are welcome (01-225 3048).

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