

# Forty years of the RCGP: a view from outside the British Isles

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## Introduction

THE Royal College of General Practitioners is the oldest scientific organization of general practice. Most general practitioners outside the British Isles come across the College sooner or later in their career. My own acquaintance with the RCGP began early in my general practice career when an exchange with the College's north of England faculty was held in Rotterdam. This meeting of British and Dutch colleagues impressed me and it was here I met for the first time the man who was to be my MD supervisor, the organizer of the exchange and an associate of the RCGP, Heert Dokter.

Of the presentations at the exchange conference, the Teesside study of the benefits of home treatment of acute myocardial infarction versus hospital treatment stood out for its quality and relevance (Colling A, *et al.* 1979. Unpublished results). For a long time, that study exemplified for me the need to study diseases and treatment in the clinical context of general practice. The message was clear: both the British and the Dutch colleges had a lot to offer a young general practitioner.

A few years later at a meeting of the editorial board of *Huisarts en Wetenschap*, the Dutch College research journal, its editor and later president of the World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA), Arthur Hofmans gave me a copy of the *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* to read. Leaflets in the *Journal* announced the College's 1977 spring meeting. Arthur suggested I attend the meeting where I would meet the *Journal* editor Denis Pereira Gray who was in charge of the spring meeting.

I went to Exeter, not knowing what to expect, but convinced it was a good idea. That spring meeting was a series of new professional experiences and was the start of a warm friendship with Denis. Later meetings followed the same pattern and from them I have come to have a better appreciation of what is taking place in British general practice as well as having made many good friends. The *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, now the *British Journal of General Practice*, has since been my monthly and most direct link with the RCGP.

My personal experience will be mirrored by others. General practitioners from many countries have turned to the College and to British general practice for support. Essential in all of this is reciprocity, so vital in the scientific community: meetings serve to teach one about new developments, but also allow one to present and discuss one's own research.

This year is the 40th anniversary of the RCGP. The College has stimulated international developments in WONCA and the *Societas Internationalis Medicinae Generalis* (SIMG), and the founding of national colleges in many countries. English as the lingua franca of medicine, has unquestionably facilitated this. The *Journal* too has played an important part in international communication.

This paper is written to commemorate the College's 40th anniversary. I will concentrate on the *Journal* as that is the most

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obvious voice of the RCGP, particularly outside the British Isles. Its readership is well established, throughout the international world of general practice, but readership is only one side of scientific reciprocity; the other is international contributions. An analysis of the contributions to the *Journal* from outside the British Isles is reported here.

## Study of *Journal* contributions

All the authors of original contributions to the *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners/British Journal of General Practice* over the period 1964-90 have been studied. Where authors were based outside the British Isles, the title, type of paper, year of publication and characteristics of the authors were recorded.

A total of 2764 contributions published over the period 1964-90 were analysed: 629 editorials and 2135 papers (original papers, review articles and discussion papers). The number of papers published each year varied between 79 and 113. In all, 154 of the papers published (7.2%) had authors from outside the British Isles. This percentage remained fairly stable over the years studied. Eleven papers were co-written by British authors and authors from outside the British Isles. There were papers from 24 countries. Those countries contributing more than 10 papers over the study period are shown in Table 1.

The majority of authors from outside the British Isles were academic general practitioners (87%); particularly in the decade 1981-90. A few contributions (4%) came from authors of apparent UK origin who were practising abroad, for example with the British forces. The international contributions, like all the papers published over the period, covered topics as diverse as the management and natural course of acute and chronic diseases, prevention, the organization of primary care, general practitioners' and patients' attitudes, interviewing skills and teaching.

## Discussion

The Royal College of General Practitioners was the first of the scientific societies of our profession and its foundation has been as much the start of an international as a national development. The *College Journal* has testified to this 'international' dimension, reporting on international conferences and meetings, and providing information on general practice around the world. My journey through 27 years of the *Journal* was fascinating and provided evidence of the College's role in international general practice.

Table 1. Number of contributions from those countries contributing more than 10 papers over the study period.

	No. of contributions					Total
	1964-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	1986-90	
The Netherlands	1	3	9	2	13	28
USA	1	0	7	9	4	21
Israel	5	2	4	5	5	21
Canada	3	8	4	4	2	21
New Zealand	2	1	2	2	4	11

The evolution of the *Journal* into a modern medico-scientific journal represents an important development in our profession. This development set the international pace and direction for general practice. General practitioners from outside the British Isles have been able to follow the development both as individuals and scientific groups; and as contributors. Language has been an undeniable factor in this; English being the language of international scientific speech.

The analysis presented here supports the position of the RCGP in international general practice. The College no longer acts primarily as a promoter of general practice colleges, but as an agent in the dissemination and exchange of research. The College *Journal* offers general practitioners around the world

a forum in which to present scientific work and it sets the standards for peer review in, and the publication of, general practice research.

This is a profound sign of the vitality of the College: from its foundation it took upon itself an international role. This international dimension is as alive today as it was 40 years ago and I am looking forward confidently to the next 40 years of the Royal College of General Practitioners.

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