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SO FAREWELL THEN, SPRING MEETING

The first College Spring Meeting I attended was in 1980, when I was a confident, even cocky trainee (as we were still allowed to call ourselves in those days). We travelled to the shores of Lake Windermere, the weather was glorious spring sunshine, and we had a wonderful time. John Horder was then president, and Alastair Donald was Chairman of Council. As far as I can recall, it was a well attended meeting, although such things didn't matter to me then. One of the highlights was a very moving talk one evening by Chris Bonnington about his love of the mountains and the many friends he had lost striving for new conquests. Donald Court, one of a remarkable group of paediatricians who had worked together in Newcastle, had published a report on childcare in primary care, essentially recommending that all paediatric problems should be handled by specialist primary care paediatricians. He was invited to present his ideas to the meeting and was greeted with a predictably hostile reception. Plus ça change. But I have a lasting memory of a talk given by Graham Buckley on care of the elderly, from which I took the message that we should be careful not to think of everyone over the age of 70 years as the stereotypically old.

One of the GPs who had taught me as a student had recommended that I should go to such meetings to observe tribal behaviour. The Windermere Spring Meeting was the first opportunity to do so. This tribe looked like a lively, open-minded lot, and when shortly after I passed the MRCGP exam I was happy to join the tribe.

Twenty-five years on, I was in Blackpool in April for the last Spring Meeting. As they go, it was an excellent meeting, with a collection of eminent opinion formers talking about a lot of important topical matters, and an impressive collection of parallel sessions where researchers presented their latest work. There were some differences from Windermere. First, the weather, far from sunny spring, was unmistakably hostile. I tried to walk along the sea front and finished barely able to move for

cold. The other difference was the thin attendance. Despite the excellent programme, and the enthusiasm of those present, it was impossible to miss the poor attendance. After all, the membership of the College is approaching 23 000, so the 200 or so at Blackpool must have been a huge disappointment to the organisers. The College has looked at the poor attendances at the last few meetings and decided that something has to change. This was the last Spring Meeting in this format, and excellent as it was, there was something of a wake about it.

It would be easy to conclude that the big national meeting is now dead. But those of us who were in Florida last year remember the hugely well-attended meeting of the US equivalent of the College (the AAFP), which had the effect of sucking the blood out of the simultaneous WONCA meeting we were there for. The problem for the College seems to be finding a niche in what is now, compared with 25 years ago, a very crowded market place, where there are numerous local competing providers; and where there is no longer a formal requirement, as there is in the US, for a minimum period of postgraduate education to maintain one's licence to practice. The Spring Meeting embodies a paradox. Mostly, we think of our educational needs in terms of different clinical areas, using a typical reductionist approach. One of the College's roles is to speak up loud and clear for good generalists, and trying to put on a meeting with a generalist slant, and competing with well funded meetings addressing more specific clinical areas is bound to be difficult in 2005. But there is no ducking it. Ideally the College, perhaps in partnership with others, will find a way of combining the two elements, of specialist and generalist interest, in a big meeting that attracts a substantial proportion of the membership who come to learn, network and affirm their own commitment to high quality generalism. We can hope, and look out for the date in 2007.

David Jewell