

'GPs will be taking on a gargantuan task for which we are, in the most part, ill-equipped'

Ubi Scientia in the midst of the cosy cardigans of Caritas?

'And have you the heart to apply the prosaic rules of evidence to a case which bubbles over with poetical emotion?':

Strephon, an Arcadian shepherd, implores of the Lord Chancellor in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*. To this impassioned pastoral entreaty, the Lord Chancellor replies robustly:

'Distinctly. I have always kept my duty strictly before my eyes, and it is to that fact that I owe my advancement to my present distinguished position.'

Much of the response to the White Paper and subsequent Health Bill from GPs has resembled Strephon's pleading. There has been considerable focus on the human aspects of general practice: the special role of GPs; the importance of the doctor-patient relationship; continuity of care; and the professional values of GPs and doctors more generally.

It is not surprising that we have reacted in this way. Defending our values is familiar territory. The curriculum of modern medical schools quite rightly incorporates ethical considerations and discussion about the doctor's role in society.

What of *Scientia* then? GPs are more familiar than ever before with the clinical literature: 'hot topics' courses, GP updates, and a multitude of internet services promise to provide cutting-edge research (even if sometimes this requires one to have a different stance on aspirin prescribing every week). Many GPs are adept at critical appraisal and this is certainly a skill with which new trainees will be equipped from medical school.

However, there is a distinct lack of engagement with health services research. Many find time to peruse clinical literature, but far fewer look at the *Health Service Journal*. Thinking about the larger system in which we work remains a minority pastime. The Health Bill has brought this to the fore; GPs will be taking on a gargantuan task, for which we are, in the most part, ill-equipped, under-prepared, and many find frankly daunting.

There is some evidence about the likely effects of the reforms proposed in the White Paper and the perpetuation of a market-based healthcare economy. Some of this was described by the ever-eloquent Ben Goldacre in his *Bad Science* series.¹ The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) must make full use of its members and staff who are capable of synthesising the available evidence and disseminating it in a digestible form in a way which engages the media, our patients, and the public at large.

If, as it appears, there is good evidence that the White Paper is likely to lead to poorer health outcomes or worsening inequality, then this must be made clear. It will be GPs who are blamed if our patients suffer. If the College wishes to maintain its own 'present distinguished position' it must be vocal about the evidence.

Doctors, of all varieties, may be called on to play a greater role in the management of the health service in the future; it is important that they are equipped with the necessary skills. The RCGP Centre for Commissioning is good news for established doctors. Perhaps medical students, at the very start of their careers, ought to be encouraged to learn more about healthcare systems and management; studying the numerous NHS reforms would be a good place to start.

If we are to understand better the impact of changes, we also need to undertake more research. Much of the structural reorganisation in the past has been inadequately studied.² Maybe we also need to develop new ways of conducting research in an ever-changing environment, where the life of changes may be very short; for example, the announcement of the abolition of the National Care Standards Commission was made only 17 days after its official start date.³

Of course, it is right to stand up for values and principles, but it is also important not to neglect proper consideration of facts and knowledge. Let us not slip into the cosy cardigans of *Caritas* and leave the sword of *Scientia* unused in its sheath; both are vital and they strengthen each other.

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