"Until January 1953 doctors could enter general practice in the NHS with no experience in this branch of medicine."

Vocational training for general practice

It is 60 years since doctors were prohibited from entering general practice from the day they qualified in medicine. Until then a doctor on qualification was entitled 'to practise Physic, including therein the practice of Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery' without any further experience.¹ The Medical Act 1950 introduced the pre-registration year that required doctors who qualified after 1 January 1953 to complete 1 year in approved posts before they could be fully registered with the General Medical Council. No further training was required for doctors entering general practice; indeed in 1958 Lord Moran expressed the view that people fell off the consultant ladder into general practice.²

There was growing disquiet that there was no established programme of training and experience for doctors aiming to become consultants or GPs in the NHS. In December 1970 the Councils for Postgraduate Medical Education (CPME) in England and Wales, in Scotland, and in Northern Ireland were set up and the first listed function of the Council in England and Wales was to discuss the training programmes in each specialty and to ensure appropriate participation by the responsible educational bodies including the universities. The CPME, which included in its membership the presidents of all the Royal Colleges, encouraged each College to set up a Joint Committee on Higher Training with College and university representatives to consider the experience needed before a trainee could be appointed as a consultant in the NHS. The training programmes were submitted to the Council for discussion and for approval. It was easy to ensure that applicants for consultant posts had obtained suitable experience because candidates had to be interviewed by an Advisory Appointments Committee including a College and a university representative who had to be satisfied with the training of the applicant selected for the post.³

The situation in general practice was different because as each GP was an independent contractor there was no procedure required for appointing partners. The CPME decided reluctantly that the only way to resolve this was by an Act of Parliament. It had an Advisory Committee on General Practice — which was, incidentally, the first regular committee to include both

College and BMA representatives — and it was decided to recommend to government that a doctor aiming to provide general medical services must have received prescribed medical experience. It also proposed that the training requirements and approval of posts should be undertaken by a Joint Committee on Postgraduate Training for General Practice. The CPME took the view that if general practice were to take its place alongside other disciplines in medicine a 5-year period of training for general practice should be implemented, as recommended by the RCGP in its evidence to the Royal Commission on Medical Education.⁴ However it decided that a 3-year period after pre-registration was the only realistic and practicable step at the time. The Government produced the NHS (Vocational Training) Act 1976 which required doctors wishing to enter general practice in the NHS to produce evidence that they had acquired suitable medical experience and Statutory Instrument 1979 No.1644⁵ determined that from 15 February 1981 doctors must have undertaken a year as a trainee in general practice and from 16 August 1982 to have completed 3 years full-time employment in specified posts. Colleges were asked to recognise training posts aimed both at doctors wishing to devote themselves to that specialty and those who wished to gain experience in a specialty before pursuing a different career, for instance in general practice. The Colleges should invite GP representatives to join the panels considering training posts.

So for just 30 years doctors wishing to enter general practice in the NHS were required to have satisfactorily completed a period or periods of training amounting to at least 3 years whole-time employment or its equivalent in educationally approved posts. This ended the time when doctors could enter general practice in the NHS with little or no experience in this branch of medicine.

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