

# The role of the Royal College of General Practitioners at a time of crisis

### INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of a medical royal college? This is an important question to ask at a time when professional norms and expectations are changing. Doctors across all specialties are more discerning than in the past about whether they want to be a member of their professional body. This is the case for most of the Royal Colleges, perhaps particularly the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) because some GPs are more sceptical about institutions than doctors working in other medical specialties.

Where doctors used to join their college because it was just what was expected, or out of a sense of professional obligation, they now balance the pros and cons. They consider how much they want to make a personal commitment to collective professional activities and whether they think being a member of a college will make a difference to their lives. They have alternatives to college membership, such as commercial providers for educational courses, or online social networks to interact with colleagues. And, of course, they are asking how else they could spend their membership fee, particularly at a time when most people are asking hard questions about their financial priorities as a consequence of the costs of training and the cost of living crisis.

### THE STANDARD SETTING ROLE

The founding purpose of the RCGP, when it was established 70 years ago, was to encourage, foster, and maintain the highest possible standards for the emerging specialty of general practice.<sup>1</sup> Despite significant changes in society and professional expectations this mission remains as relevant today as it was in 1952.

College leaders over the decades have taken standard-setting seriously, at times implementing what felt like demanding

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expectations, for example, establishing the MRCGP as the only entry point through UK training to independent practice in 2007. The College sets standards for education and training, professional development, clinical care, and the organisation and delivery of services. It helps members to attain these standards through its continuing professional development activities, as well as through events, conferences, awards, and support programmes, delivered locally by faculties and nationally.

It's right for the College's standards for clinical care to be demanding but they also need to be attainable. The inclusion of the term 'highest possible standards' in the College mission was no accident, not least because 70 years ago general practice suffered from both a lack of attention by planners and a lack of investment — much as it does today.

The College founders were wise. They recognised that when practices are under sustained pressure, the emphasis will shift from striving for excellence to doing as good a job as possible, perhaps even simply to survive. At times such as this the role of the College must focus more on encouraging and supporting practices to adapt and change in order to ensure a sustainable future, than on pushing up standards of day-to-day patient care. For most practices, now is a time of extreme pressure.

### THE WORK OF THE RCGP

Supporting and leading general practice through a period of significant change — in particular as a consequence of the workload crisis and the pandemic — has been the focus of the College in recent years. The College developed a range of practical resources to support GPs during the pandemic, including a 'COVID-19 resource hub' with key information and clinical guidance.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the College supported the transformation of the delivery model of general practice, promoting the use of triage to manage demand, digital technologies to support remote consulting, and lobbying government to help improve the tools and support available to practices.<sup>3</sup> It also produced a range of guidance to support effective remote consulting.<sup>4</sup> While doing so it has explained to the public and to critical journalists and politicians why these changes are necessary.

The College has supported practices to work at a larger scale and collaboratively with neighbouring practices and other health and care services by lobbying for additional resources to support transformation,<sup>5,6</sup> and through its consultancy work with practices and networks.<sup>7</sup> It has encouraged and supported the development of increasingly diverse multidisciplinary teams and is supporting GPs to rethink where they add value as leaders and members of those teams.

At a time when health services are becoming increasingly transactional, the College has emphasised the importance of continuity of care, how GPs utilise trusting relationships with their patients to improve patient experience and outcomes, as well as the efficiency of the NHS.<sup>8</sup> And it has explained how relationship-based care needs to evolve to meet the changing

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nature and expectations of society.<sup>9</sup>

The College has actively promoted the contribution that general practice can make to improving the health of communities, focusing on population health and the social determinants of health, using social interventions when the evidence suggests they are effective, and addressing health inequalities. It has shone a light on examples in practices and localities across the UK of using social interventions to improve health, including innovative models of delivering the COVID-19 vaccination programme.<sup>10</sup>

Underpinning this work, the College has ceaselessly campaigned to improve recruitment and retention of the primary care workforce, to increase investment in estates and technology, to evaluate new ways of working and ensure that changes in practice are based on best-possible evidence, and to ensure that clinicians have time to do their job — to care for patients.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The College has changed dramatically as an organisation over the last 70 years and will continue to do so in the future as it addresses the massive challenges facing general practice. As it celebrates its 70th birthday, its work is even more relevant and even more important than in the past. At the age of three score years and ten the RCGP may be an institution, but it strives to be a practical and a progressive one.

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### Provenance

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