The BJGP is 70 years old. The project to digitise the full BJGP archive was completed in 2006 thanks to the generosity of the Wellcome Trust. In the past year it received over 4.9 million page views on bjgp.org alone. This month we have spent some time going down the rabbit hole to the earliest publications. In September 1953, Research Newsletter No. 1 was published by the College of General Practitioners (the ‘Royal’ would not follow until 1967). It ran to just a single page and flagged the role of research and general practice. In February 1958, the newsletter morphed into the Journal of the College of General Practitioners and Research Newsletter. In Volume 1, Issue 1, the first major editorial was No Heart to Poke Poor Billy (a quote from the poet Harry Graham). The editorial was on the GP role in accident prevention including falls to older people and scalded babies. It may be the earliest example of the ‘GPs are well placed to …’ trope that can often infuriate readers as the potential workload and responsibilities of the generalist balloon beyond the available resources. The article quotes a speaker from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents: ‘The remedy may not be an exciting new drug or a complicated surgical manoeuvre, but rather an exercise in social medicine in its widest sense, an exercise which is full of excitement, interest and reward.’ There seems a greater willingness in articles from 60–70 years ago to get involved in what would now be perceived as ‘public health’. The unintended consequence of regarding general practice as a discipline could be to exclude certain domains from one’s practice. This is where Sir Denis Pereira Gray’s conception of general practice as the integrating discipline is so crucial. In modern times, some topics that could be deemed ‘public health’ are not regarded as our remit, yet the overlap with primary care is huge and attempts to dichotomise are obviously messy and, arguably, artificial.

On the 70th anniversary, one feels obliged to speculate on the next 70 years, but as Yogi Berra quipped: ‘It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.’ Perhaps we need to look at what was not covered in the past to appreciate the challenge. The climate emergency must be mentioned here and the impact on our health will be dramatic. There is another topic that makes no appearance in the 1950s – obesity. In 1953 there was still an eating disorder, the morbidly obese. In 2022, obesity and we live in an obesogenic environment. Here is another exciting ‘exercise in social medicine’ we will need to embrace in the coming decades.

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