

‘Advanced medicine’ at the College: the fortieth Conference

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Clin Med 2004;4:376–8

The fortieth Conference on Advanced Medicine for consultant physicians at the Royal College of Physicians in February 2003 was, like all its predecessors, a sell-out. It is an opportune moment to review how continuing medical education (CME) has fared since the Royal College of Physicians took on responsibility for postgraduate medical education in 1958.

The development of postgraduate education within the College owes everything to Robert Platt, President of the College from 1957 to 1962. The year before his election, his predecessor, Russell Brain, had been elected for the seventh successive year. This event led Hugh Clegg, then Editor of the *British Medical Journal*, to write a trenchant editorial in which he attacked Brain for standing for re-election after being President for so long. He criticised the College for failing to come to terms with the emerging world of medicine in a modern welfare state, specifically with the National Health Service, as well as concerning itself too much with haggling over the terms and conditions of service of hospital consultants. In an important swipe at the Royal College of those days, Clegg also took it to task for failing to do anything about postgraduate education.¹

A new president

Platt's election was to change all that. He was Professor of Medicine in Manchester, the first academic and the first provincial to be elected President of the College. His election breached, as the *BMJ* put it, ‘the London monopoly on one of the high offices of the world of medicine’.² The journal perceptively predicted that his approach would be ‘refreshingly direct’. It certainly was. It was Platt who masterminded the move of the College from its cramped, archaic premises in Pall Mall East to a site in Regent's Park. There the remarkable modern building designed by Denys Lasdun provided an architectural counterpart to Platt's own ambitions for the future of the rather stuffy College that he had inherited. It was also Platt who was to be responsible for ensuring that the College would produce its famous report on the hazards of smoking, something that his predecessor had refused to consider.

In developing postgraduate education at the

College, Platt did not falter. On 31 October 1957, a few months after his election in the spring, Platt brought before the Comitia of the College an item he considered to be very important. Council, he reported, had agreed to set up a committee ‘to discuss the activities of the College with regard to postgraduate education’.³ By January 1958, the Postgraduate Committee had met and decided to hold a conference in July that year on the subject of ‘Anaemia and the alimentary tract’. The idea was to hold a conference to attract Fellows and Members of the College in consultant practice. Dr Witts and Dr Dacie (professorial titles were not at that time recognised by the College) were to organise the meeting, which duly took place on 25 and 26 July, 1958. The report of that first conference was not published by the College itself but by the *BMJ*, whose editor, now in total sympathy with the College's initiative, sent a special correspondent to cover the conference. His account included summaries of all the papers presented, starting with Richard Asher on lesions of the mouth and oesophagus and ending with bleeding from the alimentary tract. It was published with commendable speed by the journal, appearing within a week, on 2 August. As the anonymous reporter put it:

*The conference, the first of its kind to be arranged by the College, was an outstanding success. The high standard of the papers was matched only by the excellent organisation throughout . . . Other agreeable features were the dinner given by the College and the buffet meals taken in the Library under the watchful eyes of William Harvey.*⁴

At a second conference on ‘Clinical effects of electrolyte disturbances’ held at the College on 27 and 28 February 1959, Platt opened the proceedings by referring to the ‘very great success’ of the first conference and to the large numbers that had had to be turned away because the meeting had been greatly oversubscribed.⁵ In those days, the College's hall was able to accommodate only a hundred or so. The chairs had to be imported for the occasion, the acoustics were poor, the proceedings were often disturbed by the chiming of one of the College's clocks, and the projection facilities were primitive by modern standards. The conferences organised during Platt's presidency, and during the first two years in office of his successor, Charles Dodds, are listed in Table 1.⁶

By 1964, when the College had moved to its new premises in Regent's Park, the concept of postgraduate conferences, designed specifically for consultant physicians, was well established.

A new building

The new College building was formally opened by HM the Queen on Guy Fawkes Day, 1964. There was now a lecture theatre that could seat three hundred, the acoustics were excellent and projection facilities up to date. A few days later, the College held the first of its 'Conferences for consultants in medicine'. Similar conferences have been held every year since then. The driving force behind that first Conference was Dr Nigel Compston, Assistant Registrar at the College⁷ and physician to the Royal Free Hospital. Previous College Conferences had concentrated on a single subject, but now that five days were allotted to it, it was possible to include not only sessions on a wide area of general medicine and its specialities, but also some of the College's named lectures. Many who might have had to be turned away at Pall Mall East were now able to attend. Furthermore, the new College building made it possible for consultants from all over the country, at whatever level of seniority, to hear and question some of the best medical minds of the day. For many, and particularly for those critics (and there were many) who had shared Hugh Clegg's views on the old College, the new building and what was now going on within it was nothing short of sensational.

Eponymous Lectures, traditionally held at 5 pm in the College, had been facing dwindling audiences, embarrassing to the lecturer and to the President and College Officers. By incorporating these lectures into the conference programme, a respectably sized audience could be assured at any time to hear Nobel Prize winners speak about the joys and difficulties that underlay their work; and where medical students were free to seek more information on its relevance to clinical medicine. Thus, amongst others, they heard Ernst Chain speak on antibiotic research, Francis Crick on the genetic code, and Peter Medewar on immunology and transplantation.

There were also presentations from up-and-coming younger men – there were few women then – whose papers read as freshly now as when they were given. A new idea was the inclusion at the end of the day of clinical meetings held in London's best-known hospitals.

A varied menu

Conscious of the disparate interests of their audience, the conference organisers have succeeded year after year in arranging a menu of papers among which most participants could find something to suit their taste. There are reviews of current best practice in several major specialties, fresh looks at providing medical care in acute and chronic illnesses, the growing understanding of the chemistry of life, apocalyptic visions of bacterial and viral epidemics sweeping through poor and affluent countries, changing the world's health and environment.

From the first, the success of the conference was never in doubt and the audience was unanimous in its view that the proceedings should be published so that they would be available to physicians who had not been able to attend. Over the years a succession of publishers produced the Proceedings of the Symposium on Advanced Medicine. In 1989, the title of the printed publication was changed to *Horizons in Medicine* to emphasise that the new subjects coming into view – molecular genetics, proteomics, magnetic resonance imaging and positron emission tomography (PET), medical ethics and, yes, complementary medicine – were regular features of a physician's practice. About this time, computer software began to make desktop publishing an in-house possibility, so the decision was taken for the College itself to publish this by now well established series. The greater freedom made it easy to extend the educational value of the publication by including a self-administered questionnaire with each chapter to enable the reader to earn marks towards accreditation in general medicine or a chosen specialty.

Other topics that made an early appearance at the Conferences and have found an important role in clinical medicine include human leukocyte antigen, prostaglandins, endothelin, adherence molecules; the 1984 Conference was remarkable in producing the first comprehensive review of AIDS and the now notorious subject of Munchausen's disease by proxy. The breadth of postgraduate medical education is indicated by the inclusion of talks on the Gulf War syndrome, jet lag, Alzheimer's disease, falls in the elderly, health technology assessment as well as gene therapy and the threat from antibiotic-resistant organisms.

The organisers of the symposia (lit. 'a drinking together') did not neglect to provide suitable pabulum for the mind and body. For that, the College took Harvey's exhortation to 'provide a

Table 1. Conferences organised at the College, 1958–1963.

Date	Title	Organiser
July 25–26 1958	Anaemia and the alimentary tract	LJ Witts, JV Dacie
Feb 27–28 1959	Clinical effects of electrolyte disturbances	EJ Ross
Nov 13–14 1959	Pathogenesis of occlusive arterial disease	Lawson McDonald
July 22–23 1960	Recent advances in renal disease	MD Milne
May 17–18 1961	Clinical aspects of genetics	F Avery Jones
Mar 17–18 1962	Disorders of carbohydrate metabolism	DA Pyke
Mar 15–16 1963	The thyroid and its diseases	A Stuart Mason

feast for the Fellows' to heart and arranged a friendly and relaxed dinner in the Osler Room, thus happily combining the memory of two of the College's greatest icons. On another evening, music performed by students from the Guildhall School of Music to a level worthy of a PhD offered relaxation together with a deepening of the listener's understanding of the human condition.

The fortieth conference and the first

When considering the fortieth Advanced Medicine Conference, it is perhaps worth comparing the programme with that pioneering meeting arranged by Nigel Compston all those years ago. The 2003 programme began with a session on renal disease which dealt with kidney failure, glomerulonephritis and dialysis. By contrast the 1964 meeting only considered renal hypertension. Neurology, absent from the first conference, included papers on multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease and headache, all subjects that have appeared in the programme on many occasions. The cardiology session was devoted to the prevention of coronary artery disease. By comparison, in 1964 cardiologists had concentrated on auscultation, now an almost outmoded art, the scope of surgery in acquired heart disease (then in its infancy), the management of cardiac arrhythmias (still a feature in many more recent conferences), and cardiomyopathy. Gastroenterology then included a paper on the treatment of ulcerative colitis. This year *Helicobacter pylori*, unheard of until 1984, began the session but there was the same hoary old chestnut, inflammatory bowel disease, which appears on programmes regularly and about which there is so little new to say. Nevertheless, it is a subject on whose treatment the average physician, such as those who attend the annual Conferences, clearly welcomes advice. Under infection, this year's programme dealt with 'The antiviral revolution'. Shades of the past! In 1964 Sir Charles Dodds had chaired a session with papers on 'Virus infection and interferon', by A Isaacs, the discoverer of interferon, and on 'Antiviral agents' by Dr DJ Bauer.

There were, however, many issues that would not have been considered in 1964. In 2003 there was a session on international health which included multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (a disease thought in 1964 to have been conquered) and 'Malaria for the physician', more important now than then in view of the great increase in air travel. Clinical trials were well known in 1964 but we now have to know about meta-analysis, as well as subjects such as 'The National Cancer Research Network'. And the session on imaging using PET scanning and nuclear magnetic resonance techniques, which have made the human body virtually transparent, would have been unimaginable in 1964. There were two named lectures, one the Croonian given by Professor David Barker who again put forward his hypothesis that diseases such as coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes are disorders of growth, a concept unheard of forty years ago.

Overall the programme appears to have suited the participants, ranging as it does from science on the one hand to the practice of medicine, and more recently its management, on the other. The fact that the organisers have in the past received

letters from some complaining that the programme is too scientific and from others who think it is too clinical, suggests that the balance is usually about right. That view is supported by the responses to questionnaires filled in by participants in recent years. Nor does the College seek simply to reflect the latest headlines in the medical press. It tends to follow that advice given by an older physician to his eager young colleague: 'Never be the first to adopt a new treatment, nor the last to give it up'.

The report published in the *British Medical Journal* of Robert Platt's first postgraduate conference in 1958 referred not only to the high standard of the papers presented but also to the fact that 'no speaker was allowed to exceed his allotted time and the programme at no time fell behind schedule'. That standard has been maintained ever since.

Much is owed to the staff of the College who with equanimity and good humour organise the Conferences, and to the organisers who arrange for their colleagues to take part and who edit the proceedings. But it was Professor Robert Platt, later Lord Platt, who first established the College's postgraduate programme, aiming particularly at 'the consultant, not the man in training, since', as he put it, 'we must all of us, with advances in medicine as rapid as they are today, feel in need of refreshment'.⁵ A whole generation of Fellows of this College has benefited from Platt's foresight.

Acknowledgements

I express my thanks to Mr Geoffrey Davenport and other members of the College Library for their help in the preparation of this paper. The published proceedings of the early meetings at Pall Mall East and of the forty Advanced Medicine conferences in the Regent's Park College are in the College Library.

References

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- 4 Anaemia and the alimentary tract. Conference at the Royal College of Physicians (from a special correspondent). *Br Med J* 1958;2:301-3. The author of this paper was the special correspondent.
- 5 Platt R. Opening remarks to conference on clinical effects of electrolyte disturbances. 1959, p ix.
- 6 The published proceedings of these early conferences are preserved in the Library of the College.
- 7 Compston N. Editor's Foreword. *Advanced medicine*, 1964, p xi.