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Future of academic psychiatry: Professors of Psychiatry (PoP) Club

During the 1960s psychiatry was particularly concerned with academic issues, both postgraduate and undergraduate. In response, the late Professor Sir Dennis Hill called a meeting of the professors of psychiatry, of whom there were only 16 or 17 in the UK at that time, and 15 assembled in the Great Northern Hotel in King's Cross, London. He suggested that perhaps they should form an informal club. This was duly supported by those present and, on 21 January 1967, the Professors of Psychiatry (PoP) Club was established.

Professor Ferguson Rodger was elected Chairman and Professor K. Rawnsley was secretary. Initially, membership of the Club was open only to professors of psychiatry in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, who held positions as Heads of Departments. Professors who were not Heads of Departments had to be sponsored by at least four members of the Club.

The purpose of the Club was to promote the academic development of psychiatry and to provide a forum for discussion of the problems facing academic psychiatry in terms of research and teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Meetings were held twice yearly, followed by a social gathering.

In the third year of the Club's existence, its membership was revised, automatically admitting all professors of clinical psychiatry to membership. It was further established that the Chairmanship would rotate among members, who would then act as host for the Club meetings.

A formal request was made in the Club's fourth year, that it should take on a more active role on behalf of academic psychiatry. However, it was agreed that unless special circumstances arose, the Club would continue to operate as an informal body, resisting an overt, corporate political role. Meetings usually coincide with those of the Royal College of Psychiatry and are held twice a year.

Membership of the Club has continued to grow and today there are about 130 members, compared with the 16 or 17 of the 1960s. PoP now reflects the many branches of psychiatry that exist in the universities of this country. This strength of membership is vital to promote the continuing health of psychiatry in the UK at a time of unprecedented change and challenge for both higher education institutes and the NHS, which offer unparalleled opportunities for creative interaction between the two. Specifically, it should be emphasised that higher education institutes, and their psychiatry component, will succeed or fail in the changing external climate according to their ability to adapt; the traditional academic ethos must also adapt to respond to contemporary problems.

The extensive reorganisation and change in the structure of the NHS has inevitably affected staff training

and utilisation. The Tomlinson Report on Health Services in London (Tomlinson, 1992) and the Calman report on specialist medical training (Calman, 1993) were just the beginning of more fundamental changes that followed during the 1990s. Concern about the future of clinical academic medicine in general and psychiatry in particular began to emerge following the Report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology (1994), which led to the establishment of Sir Rex Richards' Task Force to investigate disincentives to a clinical academic career (Richards, 1997). Examination of the working relationship between universities and the NHS by various joint committees has been continuing and there are more changes on the horizon (Goldbeck-Wood, 2000; Savill, 2000). We need to be responsive to these changes, anticipating them whenever possible, rather than merely having to react to them. More needs to be done to adapt the general professional education of medical students to the changing circumstances they will undoubtedly face in the future.

Change is not confined to education and training for service delivery: the nature of research has also changed, with dramatic advances in basic biomedical, behavioural and clinical areas. Research methodologies are now so diverse that it is beyond the gift of any one individual, of whatever scientific eminence, to be acquainted with all of them. Similarly, health systems and health service research now address problems of health needs, population coverage, utilisation, cost, management and effectiveness and explore their relationships with broader aspects of health economy and development. These fields of research clearly call for a broader range of disciplines than has often been the case in the past. The frivolous sounding PoP club acts as a focal point and sounding board for these important discussions.

References

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