

converge, more coherent patterns are emerging with respect to the precise clinical needs of different groups of patients.

The Board concluded that the prospects for the development of further types of inquiry were bright: the areas of application of new knowledge and techniques were likely to expand considerably over the next ten years. Its members were conscious, however, that among the medical and psychological sciences subserving psychiatry there were daunting and virtually untouched problems affecting both theory and practice; even here, however, there were grounds

for cautious optimism and for the belief that only the application of rigorous scientific standards could lead genuine advancement of the subject.

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Research and the Royal College of Psychiatrists

By A. C. P. SIMS, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Leeds and Chairman of the Research Committee

Right from the beginning, and that is not a very long time, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has been concerned with research. In the Charter, the Research Committee is set up as a Standing Committee of Council, of the College. Our membership is entitled to know what the Research Committee has been doing for the last four years. What are the concerns of the College for research?

The Research Committee has a Janus-like role; communicating both inside and outside the College. Its aims are to advise the Council on the place of research in all College activities; that is, in training, in stimulation of higher standards of practice, and in promoting new knowledge. In particular the aim is to see that fund-granting and research-supporting bodies are informed as to what kinds of research in psychiatry are worthwhile, and it puts potential researchers in touch with grant-giving bodies. Further, through its working parties, the Committee carries out some projects which are best conducted at national level.

Encouragement to researchers

Encouragement of research interest is an important concern of the Committee, particularly in advising and enabling trainees in psychiatry to become involved with research.

An important way of doing this has been to use the resources and experience of the members of the Committee in giving advice about method and about the practical issues of carrying out projects. We have, in the past, used the pages of the *Bulletin* to offer assistance in research problems. Enquiries about research from psychiatrists, either consultants or trainees, come to the Committee, and we put the enquirer in touch with someone who can help him. This will most often be an experienced researcher in his locality; but it may also involve contact with an expert in his particular field of study who will be able to give detailed advice on methodology and the likelihood of this project attracting funds. There are plans, through the *Journal*, for producing more detailed practical advice for researchers.

To provide an opportunity for the presentation of research carried out by trainees there has, for the last two years, been

a session at the Annual Meeting of the College for a large number of short papers by trainees. This session has shown the wide extent to which small-scale research is being carried out by trainees all over the country. It has highlighted the need for a similar form of presentation of short free papers for those who are not trainees.

We have been closely interested in the research option in the Membership examination of the College. Very few candidates have taken this option, and a disappointingly small proportion of these pass the examination. For a reasonably good candidate, even if he has carried out an appropriate research project, there seems little advantage under the existing regulations for him to hazard the uncertainty of the research option. Some opinion in the College feels that the present format and timing of the MRCPsych examination at the end of three years in psychiatry has had a deleterious effect upon creativity in psychiatric research. The Research Committee has made proposals for modifications in the research option which, it is hoped, would encourage research during the third year of basic training in preparation for the Membership examination.

Various courses in research method appropriate to psychiatry have been organized under the auspices of the Research Committee. These have dealt with the practical and elementary issues, and it is hoped they will give trainees confidence and enthusiasm to become involved in research. To my knowledge such courses have taken place in London, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, Lichfield and York.

There is an existing research register of the College, and this is in the process of being brought up to date. It is clearly helpful for researchers new to a field to know who else is carrying out research in this or a related area.

An agent for carrying out research

An important part of our business is to find ways in which questions addressed to the College by Government Departments, Research Councils and other organizations relating to mental health issues might be investigated, and also to represent the needs of psychiatric research to these organizations. Several questions relevant to research have come to

the Committee from the Officers and Council of the College.

The College, of course, has access to psychiatric hospitals and their staff throughout the country. This is potentially valuable for research into rare conditions in which large enough numbers for research could only be collected nationally, and also for surveying practice and opinion in the treatment of mental illness over the country. The first such project to be completed was the survey by Drs Barraclough and Mitchell-Heggs in the use of neurosurgery for psychological disorder in the British Isles¹.

A research unit has been set up at the College headquarters, and the survey of electroconvulsive therapy in England, Wales and Scotland is nearing completion. Northern Ireland had previously carried out a similar survey, and it is hoped that it will be possible to adopt the existing method of study for the Republic of Ireland. Other projects are at the planning stage. For example, there is interest in career opportunities for women in psychiatry. There is also preliminary work on a survey of unexpected death among psychiatric patients.

The effectiveness of the Research Committee is much strengthened by having representatives of the Department of Health and the Medical Research Council attending its meetings. These representatives are able to give us useful information for planning research.

Emphasizing research-mindedness and the problems and advantages of research in psychiatry.

A need was recognized several years ago for a small book describing the value of mental health research to a non-medical readership. This task has been undertaken independently by Dr Richter with contributions from a number of members of the Research Committee². There is certainly further scope for making known the needs of psychiatry for research support, and also what research has achieved so far.

It is an important function of the Research Committee to represent research interests in all other areas of College activity; at Council, in the Standing Committees, Specialist Sections, Divisions, and also at open meetings of the College. We are most concerned to see that the importance of research is recognized at consultant appointment committees, and in the approval of hospitals and training schemes for psychiatric and higher psychiatric training.

The Research Committee does not itself carry out research; this is not an activity that committees are good at, but working parties of the committee support the College-employed researchers in their work. Neither is the Research Committee directly concerned with raising funds; but it is ready to supply the information to make a case for the value of supporting psychiatric research. It does not wish to take over the job of university departments of psychiatry, and so

College-supported research is likely to be concerned with projects that require national coverage and could not be undertaken locally.

In some areas there are an increasing number of trainees involved in research projects. In other areas traditionally associated with research there is concern that an anti-research ethos has developed. Some trainees have mistakenly seen a conflict between individual care for patients, and the collection of quantitative information about mental illness and the formation of testable hypotheses. This is unfortunate, as it is just within those disciplines of our specialty that these ideas are most prevalent and research is most urgently needed. Of course, there have always been a few doctors who regard training in research as a sort of finishing school for the medical élite and of no relevance to practical medicine, but there is a need for senior psychiatrists to reaffirm the potential value of clinical research in the treatment of patients.

At the same time that a large number of small projects are being carried out in psychiatry in many different places, there appears to be a diminution of large-scale research with the closure of some units. There are fewer career opportunities in psychiatric research than previously. In 1976-77, while psychiatric services consumed one-eighth of National Health Service revenue expenditure, only one-twentieth of combined MRC and DHSS research expenditure was in the field of psychiatry.

Psychiatry suffers from the critical mass phenomenon. The project, the funding and the personnel have to be in the same place at the same time. This is difficult to arrange in psychiatry with problems of recruitment to research, underfunding and the intrinsic difficulty of carrying out research in this field relative to some other areas of medicine. A hopeful feature of research carried out by members of the college is the number of such projects at present undertaken by trainees. Pessimistic features are the rather variable quality of some of this work and the poor prospects for psychiatrists wishing for a career in research.

We are therefore at a critical stage in psychiatric research. Many psychiatrists are carrying out small-scale research of variable quality and under varying degrees of expert supervision. If adequate funding for larger scale and better planned research is forthcoming, this interest may be exploited to the ultimate benefit of our patients.

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