

RES MEDICA

Journal of the Royal Medical Society



The Royal Medical Society To-day

Editor: J. A. Gray

Editorial Committee: F. Cockburn, A.W. Dellipiani, C.V.Ruckley

Abstract

We have often heard that our University, with its paucity of halls of residence and common rooms used for the right purpose, is fast developing the atmosphere of a huge and impersonal technical college. The undergraduate, his brain dulled by the heavy aroma of haddock, emerges each morning from his "digs". He returns in the early evening to decipher a sheaf of laboriously scribbled notes that might even be headed by the "good morning, ladies and gentlemen" with which his lecturer aroused him from complete coma into the semi-conscious state in which the rest of his day is spent. He has contributed nothing to, and has gained nothing from his day at the "University."

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We have often heard that our University, with its paucity of halls of residence and common rooms used for the right purpose, is fast developing the atmosphere of a huge and impersonal technical college. The undergraduate, his brain dulled by the heavy aroma of haddock, emerges each morning from his "digs". He returns in the early evening to decipher a sheaf of laboriously scribbled notes that might even be headed by the "good morning, ladies and gentlemen" with which his lecturer aroused him from complete coma into the semi-conscious state in which the rest of his day is spent. He has contributed nothing to, and has gained nothing from his day at the "University."

It is perhaps here that the R.M.S. can play its most important role by helping to fill this yawning gap in our undergraduate days with something intangible, but nonetheless lasting for that. No one would pretend that this Society can cure apathy or provide a panacea for every student's problems. Nor is it intended that this Journal should become a medium of propaganda and advertisement. But when this unique Society is actively supported by only a fraction of the undergraduate population, there is room for self-examination on both sides.

Why does the majority of students not belong to the Society? Surely financial reasons cannot be considered when the present day undergraduate thinks nothing of dissipating in the course of one evening a sum that would entitle him to a year's membership of the Royal Medical Society. Does the student not learn of the Society's existence until other University pursuits have won his heart and he cannot afford the time to serve more than one master? This may well be, for in the natural course of events it is the senior student who runs the Society now that the rigours of the pre-registration year have taken this honour from the newly qualified doctor. In their clinical aura senior students are often out of touch with their junior brethren; besides the tenor of debate in the R.M.S. is less attractive to the pre-clinical student since it is more closely geared to the needs of the senior undergraduate.

Some consider that the Achilles' heel of the R.M.S. is its refusal to move with the times; that pompous formality and etiquette were in keeping with the elegance of eighteenth century Edinburgh but have no place in modern times. Sir Robert Hutchison (then Dr Hutchison) indicated in his famous Inaugural Address of 1912, however, that either the proceedings must degenerate into a rag in the absence of a certain amount of dignity or else, with the inhibitory influence of a senior medical man in the hall, the debate must lose its freshness and spontaneity.

Whilst the privilege of unrestricted undergraduate debate in Private Business is to be cherished, guidance from and contact with teachers and

lecturers is much welcomed at the Public Business meetings of the Society and within the pages of this Journal. Some undergraduates outwith the Society contend, perhaps with a note of jealousy, that it exists solely to promote closer contact of a few privileged Members with the teaching hierarchy. The Society has every intention of doing this, but on a much wider scale which will also allow the more junior Members to benefit from the liaison. In this University where the lecturer's bench is so often an insuperable barrier, any means of furthering student-staff relations is surely assisting a worthwhile cause, particularly at a time when changes in the curriculum and format of teaching are imminent.

Finally, the R.M.S. has been criticised for remaining aloof and as it were upon a pinnacle separated from other undergraduate organisations in the University. Such a situation is regrettable but, as is customary, there are two sides to the question. Firstly, membership is not confined to students nor even to medical men and, secondly, the R.M.S. is not a University Society, although it depends on the Faculty of Medicine for the vast majority of its Members. On the other hand, the Society would be the first to acknowledge the long record of co-operation which has existed between the University and itself; besides it is grateful for the readiness of members of the staff to assist the Society in any way they can. Whilst healthy relations exist between the R.M.S. and the staff, it is then unfortunate that a greater proportion of undergraduates cannot reap the fruits of this union. Closer linkage with the Students' Representative Council and its Medical Faculty Committee is therefore not only desirable but in keeping with the spirit of tradition. Although the Society must always maintain its individual identity together with both financial and legislative independence, it can surely be gracious enough to maintain friendly relations with fellow students and their representatives. Perish the thought that either stands to gain nothing from such a union; both stand to lose much by secession.

So much for the negative pan of the balance. What of the positive? The content of Dr Hutchison's Address of 1912 still applies to-day and much of what he prophesied has come true. The Society's Library has seen great changes during the last few sessions and will, within the foreseeable future, be fully catalogued due to the enthusiasm and energy of successive *Librorum Custodes* and the generosity of the Carnegie Trust. The enlargement of the Museum with new specimens, microscopes and slides is due to the kindness of the Professor of Pathology. Besides after the installation of suitable heaters in the reading rooms it is hoped that more Members will be encouraged to use the Society's premises during the week.

Friday evenings in Autumn and Spring, however, remain as always the Society's highlight. Dissertations still provide the student with an opportunity of reversing that "criticism of medical education to-day that it makes the student too receptive and insufficiently productive". The ensuing article on Sir J. Y. Simpson verifies Dr Hutchison's words "how often the child has been the father of the man, and the subject which was first brought forward here has been the foundation of a great life work." The recent and controversial television programmes further exemplify Dr Hutchison's emphasis of the importance of exposition and self-expression often first cultivated through discussions in the Society's Hall. "The doctor is no longer merely a private and confidential adviser, he is becoming a public guide, counsellor and friend as well . . ."

At a time when religions, cultures and individuals are menaced by nuclear weapons and foreign ideologies, living traditions assume an importance never envisaged by their inaugurators. Let us then foster unity and friendship and be worthy heirs of our heritage.