

Problems of continuing medical education in a developing nation

IT IS A TRUISM that medical men of today have to keep up with the advances of medicine in order to enable them to practise their profession properly. This implies that doctors must be orientated towards the idea of continuing medical education as a permanent feature of their professional life. To a large extent, this is self-education, supplemented at intervals by refresher courses and training courses. Self-education can be visualised as two processes: firstly, the observation and study of phenomena such as disease; secondly, the regular reading of books and journals.

Medical educators have already accepted that students should be trained to continue their education themselves after they leave their medical schools and the implementation of programmes designed to secure this aim should already have taken place in most universities.

While so much lip service has been paid to the need for continuing education, when one looks at the situation from the viewpoint of a young medical graduate working in this country, what are the facilities that are available? He can, and often does, subscribe to one or two medical journals on his own. If he is a member of the Malayan Medical Associa-

by Lim Kee Jin

tion, he receives a copy of the Medical Journal of Malaya and also the Singapore Medical Journal through a mutual exchange arrangement. Apart from a few text books which he may purchase now and then, these form the basic reading of most of the general practitioners.

What about the medical officer working in Government service? In the larger hospitals of this country, there are library facilities of some kind, mostly inadequate and poorly organised through lack of funds and staff, except where some dedicated person makes it his personal responsibility. In the smaller district hospitals, library facilities are sadly lacking in most cases. Reference books, if available, are often the cast-offs from some medical officer's collection. Journals that may be found in larger hospitals seldom find their way to district hospitals. Yet, it is in these very hospitals that there is the greatest need for some good journal and up-to-date reference books since the doctors are isolated from professional colleagues and libraries.

Provision of adequate library facilities appears to

be an urgent necessity for the district hospitals to enable the medical officers to keep in touch with medical progress and give of their best. To assist the Government in obtaining the most for its money, members of the medical profession should set up a committee to recommend a basic set of books and journals suitable for a district hospital, another for a general practitioner, with suggestions for expanding the "core" of basic books when funds are available. The assistance of a medical librarian would be extremely useful in this connection.

Quite apart from the problem of inadequate library facilities is the question of adequate leisure for the doctor to read. In this respect, both the hard-worked general practitioner and the overworked medical officer in a small district hospital are in the same situation. They are likely to be too tired and exhausted during their short periods of leisure that the thought of reading a medical text or journal is anathema. We can only hope that the general practitioner will find more time for his reading and that medical officers can get time off occasionally to keep up. The latter situation can only improve when the medical services are adequately staffed.

One method of attempting to overcome the lack of time for reading is to utilise summaries and abstracts. A number of journals of abstracts are available for the busy doctor and enable one to obtain a rapid, though superficial, survey of the medical scene. Some annuals and year books serve the same purpose but are a little more detailed and

probably more suitable for the purposes discussed above.

A number of publications put out by large drug firms and also a new type of journal distributed free to members of the medical profession but supported by advertisements have established high standards in design, presentation and formulation of articles. Colourful, made interesting with numerous illustrations and well written, they tempt the doctor away from the often drab and severe appearances of the usual journals. Some offer abstracts of current articles published in scientific journals, others present succinct summaries of common diseases and their management. They also offer articles of wider interest embracing the arts, crafts or literature in their glossy productions. I suspect that a fairly large majority of our members obtain their entire mental sustenance from them, but should we complain if they are presented so attractively and also provide their readers with the information that they should have? The danger lies in the subtle presentation which may sow a bias in the reader's mind, particularly if his reading is solely confined to this kind of literature.

Alas, I do not see any protection against this form of psychological influence except by teaching our medical students and doctors to be more critical and to read more widely among other journals and books in order that they can then have a basis for comparison and critical assessment. We still have a long way to go before we reach that stage but it is an ideal well worth aiming for.