

A safe port in times of trouble

John Latham

It is difficult to describe how deplorable was the plight of general practice in Ireland in the early eighties. I returned from a training year in Scotland in 1983 with two other young GPs; our current chairman, Mark Walsh and John Cronin. I could hardly believe how primitive conditions were. We had to return to Scotland to sit our oral MRCGP exams; the papers could be taken in Dublin.

Most GPs were working single-handed and they were isolated from their colleagues, from other health workers and virtually ignored by health boards. There were no educational or CME opportunities except for consultant-led meetings sponsored by drug companies. Morale was low and many older doctors were suffering ill-health as a result. I remember one or two meetings of clinical societies which helped to dispel the gloom.

Imagine my excitement when I heard of the first meeting of a new Irish college in Kilkenny. What a relief it was to meet like-minded young doctors and how reassuring to discover older torch bearers such as James McCormick, Conal O'Doherty, John Mason, Bill Shannon and a young Michael Boland, as well as other visionaries. Many of these had sustained their professional development and educational needs within the Republic of Ireland Faculty of the RCGP.

My first workshop was a small group session led by Bill Shannon, who would later fill the first chair of general practice on the island in the RCSI. This founding meeting was a remarkable confluence of vision, expertise and extraordinary intellectual energy – all focused and distilled by a small group of men and women who knew that without a vibrant national college, general practice would never flourish.

From a personal view point, the ICGP has been my mentor, sustainer, safe port in times of trouble and a stimulus to professional development on many fronts. I am absolutely sure that I would not be practising as a GP in Ireland now if



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the college did not exist.

Very quickly, the faculty system was developed and my local was (and is) the William Stokes Faculty based in South Inner City Dublin. In the early days we met frequently and avidly grasped opportunities to organise, share professional experience and develop ways to fulfil our educational needs. Young and inexperienced people like me were privileged to learn from older and wise colleagues such as Ellard Eppel and Matt Lynch.

We submitted a proposal for a CME tutor for our faculty and this was accepted by the ICGP. To my amazement, nobody would apply for the post; so I was pushed forward as the default candidate. Thus began my most daunting, exciting and fulfilling decade of professional development. I think it was 1987 and there were eight tutors in Michael Boland's new team; the CME network was being rolled out across the country. It was stimulating, hard work and very enjoyable.

Tutors' workshops were educational tours des forces by Michael as he led with panache, and it is true that at times we were in awe. The work in the faculties was very stimulating, especially after I had formed seven groups which I attended each month. It seems crazy now but I met so many marvellous colleagues and absorbed so much from them and the educational material that we were using and developing that I felt it was very worthwhile. I am not sure that my wife and infant daughters appreciated my frequent nocturnal absences from home!

I continued this work for almost a decade and can assure all my ex-group members that I gained enormously from their friendship and collegiality. I continue to attend one of my old groups, now ably tutored by Claire McNicholas.

I am an ordinary, busy, coalface GP with all the needs of advancing age the demands of professional life, and I

continue to benefit from the many services and facilities provided by the college. Though not an academic, I was privileged to avail of the first distance learning diploma course provided by the college, the diploma in therapeutics. This was rigorous and extremely well resourced, providing a working upgrade in knowledge of a wide range of pharmacological and non-drug management options for many of the myriad conditions to be met in general practice. I look forward to a refresher course to be held later this year.

Other members of my practice team have benefited hugely from other courses provided – some of the administrative staff have completed management and receptionist courses. Research in my practice has been supported by grants and expertise from the research committee.

Other remarkable benefits, from a professional development point of view, have been courses in media skills, writing and many opportunities to use and develop these fledgling talents. I must add to the list, training in addiction and the methadone programme, and most recently my late vocation as a postgraduate trainer as further evidence of the powerful influence of the college for the good of the specialty in general and ordinary GPs such as myself in particular. The ultimate goal of all of this has been improved quality and greater range of service to our patients.

I could expand at length on many more facets of the ICGP which continue to nourish and enrich our lives as GPs, but will conclude by reiterating how far we have come in 25 years. I would hope that younger colleagues will never take for granted what has been gained. The next 25 years will certainly require more dedicated men and women of energy, intuition and intellect to steer the college through times which may be even more challenging and exciting than those we have experienced since 1984.

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