

Nurturing a love of learning

Mary Favier

The college has been a presence all my professional life from when I did the membership exams in 1990 – and was officially a ‘young one’, to now as part of the college executive as chair of the education committee. It’s been a hugely varied journey I’ve been privileged to take.

My first experience of the college was common to many; that of the exams and rehearsing the right answers for questions and thinking we’d covered all the bases. This proved flawed thinking the week after finishing the MICGP exams. Having then started an obs & gynae SHO job, the first weekend I undertook a locum in rural Cork. A phone call at two in the morning summoned me out to “herself, she’s fallen out of bed” and “I’ll meet you at the end of the road – you won’t get the car up the boreen”. These were the days before mobile phones and thus I headed out into the mist relying on his curt instructions and a good sense of direction.

I stopped at the end of what I thought was the right boreen and on seeing no one I thought I’d got it wrong. Then suddenly out of the ditch appeared this unkempt man in his 50s, coat tied with baling twine and brandishing a shotgun. He waved it first in my direction and then at the track and immediately started off up the hill. My memories of the seconds I sat there wondering what to do are of clearly thinking ‘Janey, I don’t remember covering this for the exams!’

As it transpired, his mother had indeed fallen out of bed and fractured her hip and I never found out (or asked) what the shotgun was intended for. I didn’t realise it but a journey of lifelong learning had begun.

After GP training and obs, I went travelling for three years and did not give the newly formed college another thought. In early 1994 I returned to Cork and started looking for work. It now seems hard to believe that GP jobs were hard to find but I did stints as locum SHO in radiotherapy and orthopaedic

posts for various fortnights when there were no GP locums. It’s one way of confirming one’s career choice!

Having had a relationship with the college as an authority figure – both immediate in terms of exams and vocational training, and distant in terms of any understanding of its role or future role in my life, I continued oblivious until a GP friend asked would I come to a meeting of a college AGM organising committee. Cork was to host the AGM that year and I was co-opted on to the somewhat grandiosely named academic committee just by turning up.

I was a little intimidated to meet former trainers and examiners on the committee but they quickly let me know they were ordinary folk and didn’t have two heads. And that’s where my first association with the college started – the AGM of 1994. Around the same time the college advertised its first significant educational post in the form of the Quality in Practice Programme. This was the brainchild of Michael Boland and was part-sponsored by Glaxo Wellcome. It was a half time education job resourcing and writing educational materials for Irish GPs and a half-time job in the group practice in Skibbereen. The same friend (Orla Batt – take a bow) told me about the advert and I applied. It was probably listing the AGM committee on my CV that got me the job!

The Quality in Practice programme – quickly shortened to QIP – was a great job. It brought the opportunity to work with Michael and be on the inside track of the many projects he was involved with; to meet and listen to the varied and talented people he knew in the college and the wider education community. It also gave me a solid grounding in a highly-regarded practice. Writing the educational materials was interesting if demanding. The deadlines always seemed like months away and somehow became next week. The subjects covered such as the elderly, adolescent health, referrals, Travellers, prevention and computerisation,

addressed gaps in the availability of educational materials relevant to Ireland.

Some have remained relevant and have not been replicated such as that on Travellers' health and others served a purpose that was quickly updated by bigger college projects such as GP IT. As the first college 'education fellow' the job description was loose and evolved over time. As well as writing educational materials, I became involved in Michael's work as National Director of CME and was able to attend the tutors' workshop – something I soon recognised as a feat of organisation and innovation.

There were many late nights with multiple flipcharts, flow diagrams and lots of photocopying in last-minute preparation for each workshop. The hot topics of the day were discussed by tutors and many a good idea formulated and refined for the CME small groups around the country. As part of this role, I wrote with Michael the 'CME tutors' handbook'. It drew on his knowledge of educational group theory and practice, and is still in use today. As I now appreciate, he was 15 years ahead of his time in this area.

Before I moved to Skibbereen and was based half-time in the office in Michael's house, I had been somewhat in awe of Michael Boland and his reputation. I wasn't long there when I came to appreciate that his wife Susan deserved to be deified ahead of Michael. Her contribution and commitment to Michael's work, my job and the college in general was exceptional and much appreciated.

After four years as the QIP fellow, I went on to become a CME tutor, experienced the highs and lows of WONCA '98 in Dublin and went to Bahrain teaching on the GP training programme. A national waiting and consulting time study was a great success but never written up (lessons learned). I've sat on local and national committees that made a difference and some that didn't. I've attended conferences I loved and contributed at events I didn't; all the time encountering new ideas and ways of thinking with a continual affirmation of the central importance of general practice to healthcare.

I am now halfway through the ICGP/Queen's Masters in Medical Education and through this have had reason



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to reflect-on my own educational journey. At best I could have been described as an average medical student – an environment that I was ill prepared for and never prospered in. I now appreciate that without the ICGP I may have stayed an indifferent performer and under achiever.

The college served to create for me an environment that fostered many different involvements and exposures and nurtured and rewarded a love of learning. This served to continually improve my practice without me actually appreciating until now why this was so. I attribute this to the superb role models and mentors I encountered at all stages. These were the people and activities that gave me something to aspire to, a sense that it is always worth trying and striving to improve, a sense of making a contribution to a community of general practitioners and patients.

The 19 years I have been involved with the college have flown by. My own children now attend the annual AGM adventure camp and I am delighted to welcome a new set of 'young ones'. To paraphrase: 'lots done, more to do'.

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