

On board the good ship ICGP for the long term

Maud Robinson



The administrative staff of the ICGP –

“Why on earth does a small professional body exercise such a capacity to retain its administrative staff?”



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Wanting a perspective on the ICGP from a non-medical staff point of view, and not wanting to enlist a current member of staff for the job, the editor of this volume was faced with the dilemma that not much short of a life-changing religious vocation results in staff members leaving the college. So there weren't many candidates for the job.

Why on earth does a small professional organisation exercise such a capacity to retain its administrative staff?

Many similar organisations around the globe play host to a much more transient

body of staff, as people are unhappy with office relations or just get bored, and move on.

Now, I have to tell you that noble as the profession of general practice may be, the administrative grind that goes into the making of its professional body can often seem far from noble: The marathon job of planning and carrying off the AGM every year; the huge administrative job of running the annual MICGP exams (including such interesting tasks as herding lots of ditsy actors masquerading as patients for the practical exam – I'm allowed to say that because I was one of those ditsy actors one year); the administration of all of the short courses in continuing professional development run by the college; organising public relations and communications;

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providing an excellent library service; and I'm sure I've forgotten something vital here. It has its lighter moments but basically there's quite a lot of pretty unglamorous hard graft involved. So why is it that so few staff members ever find their way out of the ICGP once they have found their way in? Basically, it's down to great staff dynamics and a good working atmosphere.

Although most contact with college members is done remotely – by post, email and phone – time and again I heard people say what a friendly and welcoming place the College is, whether first contact is by phone or being greeted by Eva's smiling face at reception (how many organisations can boast the same reception staff over 10 year or more?)

This working environment – professional and efficient while at the same time friendly and welcoming – was, I think, nurtured in the early days of the ICGP, when the staff consisted of Fionán, Orla, Carol, Annette, Caroline and Dermot, all of whom still work for the College.

By the time I joined the staff in January 2000, the College had moved to its purpose-built premises on Lincoln Place and had a non-medical staff of about 15. During the four and a half years that I worked for the ICGP the staff continued to expand to the point where the mothership at Lincoln Place was beyond capacity and the orbiting satellite of the Cumberland Place office had to be added.

The task of maintaining a sense of loyalty and good staff relations over such a period of transition is not a easy one, and without wanting to appear too fawning I would have to say that much of the credit must go to Fionán – our fearless leader (you see, I still feel fierce loyalty five years after I've left the organisation – or is it rose-tinted spectacles?) Fionán's leadership style seemed to me to usually get the balance right between benevolent dictatorship and collaborative consultation, with a certain amount of good-humoured cajoling when all else failed.

There were (and still are, I'm sure) the familiar cycles of the year – the mad frenzy leading up to the AGM or the MICGP exam, when other tasks are set aside and it's all hands on deck to get everything done, while the slightly quieter times during the summer months provide some time for taking stock and clearing up the debris of the last campaign.

Away from the main work at hand, the college does celebration and tragedy equally well. Christmas parties were always a high point of the year, as were the social events at the AGM. It was at my first AGM that my evil twin, Muriel, put in her first appearance – taking over the dancefloor in a quite disgraceful way – (was it a 70s night?) – she was nostalgically remembered as I became more demure at later college functions.

On the tragedy side, within six months of me joining the college my mother contracted breast cancer and during her short illness until her death in December 2000, I cannot imagine that there could have been a more compassionate and understanding employer than the college, as I travelled back and forth to England to spend time with her through hospital, hospice and funeral.

Then there was that most public of tragedies, the destruction of the twin towers in New York, which I remember also in the context of the ICGP. Richard Brennan, the then chairman of the college, was on one of his frequent visits to Lincoln Place as the news came in and we watched the live coverage on the CNN website – it was a sobering time to be among good friends and colleagues.

And throughout it all, the tea break has remained (I sincerely hope still) a pivotally important point in the day, when Fionan et al from the third floor couldn't resist coming down to dunk a jammy dodger with the real workers on the first floor.

When I'm passing through Dublin I try to find myself in the vicinity of Lincoln Place some day at 11 am so I can go and join in that familiar ritual again.

As I mentioned at the outset, little short of the sackcloth and ashes of a devout vocation can drag the college staff away from it, and so it was for me.

And now as I minister to the Unitarian congregation in the centre of Edinburgh, made up of liberal Christians, Buddhists, Humanists and Pagans, I reflect on the similarity it has to the noble profession of general practice, with its doors open to all-comers – maybe I haven't moved so very far.

I feel a sermon coming on, on my favourite theme 'Building beloved community', but I think that the staff of the Irish College of General Practitioners already know a thing or two about that.