

Correspondence

Research and the College

DEAR SIRS

The College has been significantly unsuccessful in fostering research by younger psychiatrists. Indeed the present structure of the training programme and examination requirements almost precludes serious research endeavour by the emphasis and pressure these put on the registrars. I would also assume that the Research Option in lieu of formal examination is seldom used. Major research programmes are financed by the large institutions such as the MRC, Wellcome Trust, and to an increasing and laudable extent, the Mental Health Foundation. Perhaps the College may not be able to influence the general level of psychiatric research in trainees since incentives such as career progress do not, as yet, appear to be influenced, unlike other more competitive specialties, by the necessity to have papers in the scientific literature. It may be up to university departments to foster research in trainees, but as indicated, the competing pressures are against a fruitful outcome.

What then are the options open to the College, assuming some funding is available? In this respect, should not the somewhat excessive profits from the *Journal* be ploughed back into research, since it is on this that the *Journal* depends? It would be inappropriate to compete with the MRC by setting up a research unit. This would be extremely expensive and would lack the flexibility of other schemes. Probably pump-priming exercises are most productive in fostering new research giving the recipient time to prove his or her worth for further funding from other sources. A College fellowship for training in research would prove very prestigious and sought after and would compete with the kudos associated with, for example, the Gaskell Gold Medal. Such fellowships for younger psychiatrists should be open for competition not only in the south east of England but further north, and even over the border!

Perhaps the Research Committee should include junior psychiatrists with knowledge of the problems, and some debate take place through these correspondence columns before decisions are made as to the form that future College strategy should take.

DONALD ECCLESTON

*Royal Victoria Infirmary
Newcastle upon Tyne*

The Research Committee replies:

DEAR SIRS

The College has always maintained the encouragement of psychiatric research of high calibre as a priority. This objective, enshrined in the Charter, was the reason for

establishing the Research Committee of the College. In 1971, the year of inauguration of the College, there were proposals for establishing a College Research Unit. However, with many other demands upon the newly founded College, these plans were temporarily set aside.

With the setting up of the ECT Survey, a research unit was in fact in operation within the College building and many useful lessons for the future were learnt by the working party of the Research Committee which supervised this project. It was realized that if a more substantial project, or more than one project at a time, were to be carried out, there would be a need for more intensive research direction and co-ordination.

With completion of fund-raising for the College premises, the Appeal Committee considered that high priority should be given in a subsequent appeal for fostering psychiatric research, and the Research Committee was approached to recommend appropriate topics for research and ways in which this could be carried out. Whereas existing organizations such as the Medical Research Council and Mental Health Foundation fund research to be carried out in university departments of psychiatry and in psychiatric hospitals, there is a type of research that is peculiarly well-suited to the College which can yield useful information and potentially improve psychiatric practice; such research would include collecting of information from the national and international membership of the College and could be concerned with aspects of practice or the identification of relatively rare conditions from a large-scale survey. The ECT Survey is a good example of such a project that could only have been undertaken by the College, and produced results which have proved beneficial for improving standards of practice.

In 1982, Council of the Royal College of Psychiatrists endorsed the recommendation that the College should have a Research Unit. It is planned that this should use the national and international contacts and membership of the College. This Unit would be a co-ordinating centre for College-based research and would in no way be similar to, nor would it compete with, MRC units. It would not be involved with psychiatric research that could more appropriately be undertaken in university departments or individual hospitals. Approximate costing for such a Unit has been discussed in a working party of the Executive and Finance Committee and would include salary for staff, cost of premises (probably rental), essential office equipment, and access to appropriate computer facilities. The minimum staff would include a senior psychiatrist as Research Director (appointed for a limited period of four to five years), a research scientist, and an administrative secretary. It is envisaged that if several