

Editorial Comment

TEACHER TRAINING AGAIN

A seminar on medical teaching entitled "Approaches to Current Problems in Medical Education" was held in the Royal College of Surgeons on September 27th and 28th, 1976. This is the second teacher training course organised by the College, the first having been held in May, 1975.

The seminar was organised by the Royal College of Surgeons in conjunction with the Centre for Medical Education of the University of Dundee; the College provided the stage and the University of Dundee produced and directed the play and also provided the actors — indeed this appellation is not too wide of the mark in paying tribute to the contributors Doctors Harden and Gleeson and Messrs Dunn and Abbatt. The aim of the seminar was to acquaint the teaching staff of the College with advances in both technical and philosophical aspects of medical education and to discuss how best these developments might be adopted by the College of Surgeons. Furthermore, the organisers are aware that both students and teachers are anxious to reappraise traditional teaching methods and where necessary to adapt to the changing pattern of medical education.

In the first session curriculum planning was discussed and the traditional teacher-centred curriculum was viewed against the student-centred curriculum which depends more on self-education. The role of the independent department was evaluated and the future of these traditional departments in coordinated and integrated curricula was assessed. The importance in determining objectives in medical education was stressed, as was the difficulty in defining these objectives. For too long, it seems, the traditional paths have been followed without reappraisal of their destiny. The standard lecture was taken out of its antique cupboard, shaken, dusted, threatened with disposal and eventually put back on its hanger with the conclusion that it would not be worn as indiscriminately as in the past. The advantages of the small-group teaching and active student participation were clearly stated but so too were the problems of finance and organisation inherent in this system. There were demonstrations of audio-visual techniques and a session was devoted to the problems and possible advantages of independent learning. Appropriately, the seminar ended by viewing critically the many methods of assessing both the medical school curriculum and its progeny — the medical student. In the past more time has been devoted to the assessment of the student rather than to the curriculum but as the latter comes in for critical reevaluation, so too can the medical teacher, both pre-clinical and clinical, anticipate closer scrutiny by colleague and student.

Was the seminar a success? In terms of staging, content and attendance the answer must surely be in the affirmative. But can the true benefit of this type of seminar be assessed? The answer is more difficult. The contributions were well presented, entertaining and devoid of jargon; furthermore, the participants were shown possibilities and developments in medical education and the organisers resisted the temptation to proselytise. At the end of the day the participants were aware of the breadth of the subject but they were left in no doubt that each medical school had to decide according to its own needs and means as to how it utilised new methods. Any occasion which brings together the teachers of a medical school for discussion of their teaching methods is to be welcomed. Some of those who attended will gain little, or perhaps refuse to admit to or fail to notice any direct benefit; others will, understandably, view the development of the science of medical education with scepticism and fear the replacement of traditional methods by new techniques without careful assessment of the latter or due regard for the time-tested reliability of the former. But in the final analysis who can complain at being introduced to this new science and is it not much easier to make judgement from a position of knowledge rather than ignorance? To Professor W. A. L. McGowan, on whose efforts so much depended and to the Dundee quadrumvirate we are indebted.