



Birth of the Severn Faculty*

Dr Paul G. N. Main
Provost 2004-8, Severn Faculty, RCGP

At the last Gale Memorial lecture and dinner¹, the Provost referred to the Faculty's gavel and the founder members of the Severn Faculty. I'd been planning to research the origins of our Faculty, and this recognition of the importance to us of our shared story, provided the impetus I needed.

Our College of General Practitioners was founded on 19th November 1952, after a protracted gestation period of over one hundred years. The first person to use the term College of General Practitioners was Dr George Ross of Kennington, in a letter to the *Lancet* in 1844. All early attempts to form a College failed, despite strong support from the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries². Apothecaries were the precursors of general practitioners. Following the formation of the NHS in July 1948, general practice was in decline and apparently leaderless. There was the danger of family doctors becoming isolated, and of many of the standards and traditions of good general practice being lost. A spur for action came in 1950 with the damning, now classic, Collings Report³, A Survey of General Practice, which was commissioned and published in *The Lancet*, having examined fifty-five practices. The report in the same year from Sir Henry Cohen's Committee on General Practice and the training of the General Practitioner was also an important factor.

The formation of the College had great support from the editors of *The Lancet*, the *British Medical Journal* and *The Practitioner*, and the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries provided an address and accommodation for meetings in the early years⁴. In complete contrast, the Royal Colleges of Surgeons, Physicians and Obstetricians and Gynaecologists were strongly opposed to the formation of a fourth medical college. Interestingly, before the College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists was founded in 1929, there was formidable and outrageous

opposition from the Royal Colleges Surgeons and Physicians who took them to court in an attempt to prevent the formation of a new college and also the right for it to have its own examinations and qualifications⁵.

The first College of General Practitioners AGM was in November 1953, and by then ten, pilot regional faculties had been set up: five in Scotland and five in the rest of the UK, including one based in Bristol. It was felt that for educational purposes, and to facilitate postgraduate study and research, the regional faculties should have their headquarters near the offices of undergraduate or postgraduate deans or directors of local medical schools and of university research departments. As Bristol was the only university with a medical school in the South West, it was chosen as the headquarters for the South West England Faculty. In fact, the Bristol Medical School was founded in 1833, and like many medical schools in the UK it had pre-dated its now umbrella Bristol University, which was founded in 1909.

In 1954, the College of General Practitioners instituted the first named lecture, the James Mackenzie Lecture, which was linked to the AGM. The College realised that a named lecture could provide a valuable focus for the AGM and also help to hold the members of the organisation together by uniting them around a set of shared values ("a community of practice"). Many of the regional faculties started to develop their own lectures and awards. The first of these was the Gale Memorial Lecture of the South West England Faculty in 1957.

In 1950, Dr Arthur H. Gale was appointed as the first Director of Postgraduate Medical Studies and a lecturer in Epidemiology at the University of Bristol.

Gale's double appointment brought him into contact with the medical services from the Cotswolds and the Forest of Dean to Land's End. He was responsible both for seeing that Bristol University graduates found suitable pre-registration house appointments and for the interchange of registrars between the teaching hospital and the hospitals under the regional board. Importantly for general practice, he initiated the postgraduate courses in Bristol and the whole region. Consequently

he formed an important link between the university, the board of governors, and the regional board. Realising Gale's crucial role, the South West England Faculty immediately co-opted him as a member of the Faculty Board, and he became a good friend to the South West England Faculty. Sadly, he died prematurely in October 1956, aged 55. The Faculty decided, following his death, to preserve his memory with an annual lecture in his name - the Gale Memorial Lecture. The first such lecture, 'Opportunities and Pitfalls of General Practitioner Research', was given in October 1957 by Dr Robert E. Hope Simpson, a Cirencester GP and researcher, exactly a calendar year after Arthur Gale's death. Hope Simpson knew Arthur Gale and was able to speak with some authority about the man and his achievements.

By 1955, the original pilot regional faculty based in Bristol had become known as the South West England Faculty. It covered the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Bristol and Gloucestershire. Meetings were held at Postgraduate Centres in Barnstaple, Plymouth, Exeter, Torbay, Taunton, Bristol, Gloucester and Cheltenham⁶. There were members in Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire and Porthcurno in Cornwall⁷ a distance apart by road of 257 miles. The Faculty was the longest in the UK, making attendance at Faculty meetings a real challenge.

One of the objectives of the College from its foundation was that the functional unit of the College should be the small group, possibly based on postgraduate centres with members making a maximum journey of twenty miles coming to meetings. Consequently, the trend has been for the progressive division of faculties into smaller geographical units. The first major division was in 1967, when the Welsh Faculty split into South East Wales and the South West Wales faculties. Discussions were soon started in the South West England Faculty but they proved to be rather protracted. There was a referendum in 1971 to decide whether the Faculty was too large, and should be divided into two. Opinion was evenly balanced, so no change was made.

In 1972 the College became the Royal College of General Practitioners when it

* This article first appeared in the Severn Faculty Newsletter



West of England Medical Journal

Formerly Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal



The e-journal of the
Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society

Birth of the Severn Faculty WEMJ Volume 117 No3 Article 1 September 20

was granted its Royal Charter and HRH Duke of Edinburgh became its President and Patron.

In 1978, following the publication of four papers about the future of the College in the Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners, meetings were held throughout the Faculty to discuss the issues raised. Overall, 87 members (17%) took part in these discussions. Again, the issue of the size of the Faculty was raised. The main argument for a split was that with 527 members, increasing by 80-90 per year, the Faculty was becoming unwieldy. Communication remained a problem despite the completion of the M5 motorway. Faculty Board meetings were held four times a year up and down the M5 axis, with some members always having to do a return journey of over 150 miles. Also, some felt that the establishment in 1973 of a Department of General Practice in Exeter provided a natural academic centre for a new Faculty covering Devon and Cornwall.

Arguments for the split were mainly around distance and time. For a Gloucester city member, the distance to a meeting in Exeter was the same as to central College in London. A meeting in the West Midlands Faculty would be half the distance to Exeter. Supporters of the split seemed to be mainly from Devon and Cornwall. But many other members felt that they were 'out of touch' with the Faculty and were left 'out in the cold'. On the other hand it was clear that members' attitudes were heavily influenced by emotional ties and affection for fellow members which had been built up over many years. One argument was that, as the Regional Health Authority and also the LMC and BMA organisations all covered the entire region, why couldn't the Faculty continue to do the same. Devon and Cornwall didn't need to be a separate Faculty in order to utilise the facilities of the University Department of General Practice at Exeter. As the Faculty was large and active, it would be a pity to divide the activity and goodwill, rather than harnessing it. And what would happen to the Gale Memorial Lecture?

Strong views were expressed in the Faculty Newsletters as well as at meetings. It was decided to have a general meeting linked to a study day in Plymouth in May

1979, when members and associates could hear the various views and express their own. Prior to that meeting, members would receive a paper written by the Chairman, setting out the main arguments. The minutes of this meeting would then be circulated, with a ballot paper, for members to vote on the proposal. It was decided that the result of a 40% poll would be binding. In the event 56% papers were returned and of these 82% were in favour of dividing the faculty. Analysis of the results revealed no significant variation between the counties. It was decided that the South West England Faculty should be dissolved and two new Faculties formed from 1st April 1980.

Having decided to split the South West England Faculty into two, the provisional boards of the Severn and Tamar Faculties had to decide how to divide up the Faculty assets⁸. The minute books and faculty

archives were to go to central College, and if they already had copies, then they should be offered to the Department of General Practice in Exeter. The Faculty newsletters, bound into a single volume by Dr Eric Townsend of Camborne, Cornwall should also be offered to the Exeter Department of General Practice Library.

The Members' Register donated by Dr W. (Bill) H. Hylton of Clevedon, Somerset should remain with the Severn Faculty, as should the Photograph Album of Past Provosts. Dr E. B. Hickson of Chippenham had this made and bound in leather with black and white photographs of eleven Provosts taken by Dr M. I. (Ivor) Cookson of Gloucester. The Severn Faculty agreed to donate a copy of this album, with photographs, to the Tamar Faculty.



The Gavel and Casket



Provost's Badge and Chain



West of England Medical Journal

Formerly Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal



The e-journal of the
Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society

Birth of the Severn Faculty WEMJ Volume 117 No3 Article 1 September 20

The original Provost's Badge and Chain would go to the Severn Faculty. This had been presented to the South West England Faculty by Beecham Research Laboratories. It had been made by Garrard and Co who was, at the time, the Crown Jeweller of the UK, charged with the upkeep of the British Crown Jewels. The bars bearing the names of Provosts from Devon and Cornwall members would go to the Tamar Faculty. Dr John F. Burdon of Paignton, Devon presented a new badge and chain to the Tamar Faculty.

Dr Robin J. F. H. Pinsent of Devon presented a new gavel to the Tamar Faculty so the original gavel and casket would remain with the Severn Faculty. This had been originally given to Dr J. H. Grove-White of Cirencester, Gloucestershire and the South West Faculty, in recognition of his assistance in setting up a Faculty in Eire. Its previous history is unknown, but it is a finely carved in English Line and is inscribed 'Prinses Elizabeth 10 Dec 1877'. It is not known what this inscription refers to. The casket is of birds-eye maple veneer. To mark the formation of the Severn Faculty Dr Keith Southgate of Stonehouse, Gloucestershire had the College Owl motif carved on the original gavel and brass engraved with the names of the South West England and Severn Faculty. Mrs Southgate made a special carrying cloth satchel for the casket.

The Faculty owned two Fellows' gowns, one going to each of the new Faculties. In fact, one gown had been 'misaid' and there was a request for any news of it! As the two new Faculties were almost equal in numbers (280), the finances were divided equally, after all South West England Faculty debts had been settled.

After the Faculty split, it was decided that the Severn Faculty should retain the Gale Memorial Lecture. The Tamar faculty would have its own named lecture, the McConaghey Memorial Lecture, named after Dr R. M. S. (Mac) McConaghey of Dartmouth, Devon who was the Founding Editor of what is now known as the British Journal of General Practice. The first McConaghey Memorial Lecture 'From the Dart to the Tagus' was given in May 1980 by the President of the College, Dr John P Horder⁹.

MacConaghey had, in fact, given the 8th Gale Memorial Lecture in 1964, entitled 'Medical Ethics in a Changing World.'

Following the division of the South West England Faculty in 1980, the two new Faculties, Severn and Tamar, continued to flourish, and by 1988 they had both reached a membership of 500¹⁰.

REFERENCES:

1. Main, Paul (2015) Who was Dr Arthur Harold Gale and why is a memorial lecture named after him? WEMJ Volume 114, No. 4, Article 4
2. Fry J, Lord Hunt of Fawley and Pinsent RJFH (1983) A History of the Royal College of General Practitioners: The First 25 Years. Lancaster, MTP.
3. Collings, J. S. (1950) General Practice in England today: reconnaissance. Lancet i, 555-585. Joseph Collings' grim description of post-war general practice in England and his sombre analysis of its prospects created an immediate sensation. Within British general practice it has acquired semi-mythical status. It has been acclaimed a "classic report," "the most devastating attack on the image of the family doctor," It has been hailed as a turning point, the single most effective factor in mobilising opinion in favour of constructive change, and a seminal contribution to the formation of the RCGP.
4. Forty Years On. RCGP. 1992, 163
5. Loudon, I (1987) William Blair-Bell-father and founder Medical History Jul; 31(3): 363-364
6. RCGPSouth West England Newsletters No 52-60 (1976- 80)
7. RCGP South West England Faculty Register September 1974
8. RCGP South West England Newsletter No 60 May 1980
9. Horder J.P (1980) McConaghey Memorial Lecture. From the Dart to the Tagus. J R Coll Gen Pract; 30 (219): 585-592.
10. Forty Years On. RCGP. 1992, 158