

THE COLLEGE LIBRARY IN 1999

M. Eastwood*

Although the Library Committee is one of the oldest committees of the College it still regularly debates contemporary issues. It is chaired by the Honorary Librarian (an appointment created in 1683); the other Committee members are the Librarian, four elected Fellows, a Collegiate Member and co-opted members including Dr Michael Barfoot, the Lothian Health Board Archivist. Recently the Committee has been discussing how the Library can continue to provide relevant services to Collegiate Members and Fellows in the next century, when the current rapid changes in the structure of clinical medicine are likely to continue.

MEDICAL DISCOVERY

Medical knowledge has traditionally been developed by giving papers at meetings and then publishing work in peer-reviewed. The authors' findings then become accepted and gradually form part of a consensus which appears in review articles and is incorporated into monographs and textbooks. This orderly process has developed over the last 200-300 years. In the 1990s the timescale for this process has dramatically shortened. The time interval between a discovery or an observation being made, its writing up, appearance in a journal, approval in guidelines after testing in their field and consignment to history is shortening. The days when a writer could leave a draft of his paper in a drawer for a year or so, to allow it to 'mature', have long gone.

A POSSIBLE FUTURE

Could the worldwide web be adapted to manage this process more effectively? Harold Varnus, Director of the United States National Institute of Health, proposed the creation of a massive and freely accessible, biomedical research website called *E.Biomed*. The *E.Biomed* site would be in two parts: one part would contain research included after its appearance in peer-reviewed traditional journals; the other would contain virtually any other legitimate and reasonable work which was approved and accepted as such by two peer reviewers. Varnus's idea has limitations, and it can be argued that concentrating such a mass of literature into one area is not acceptable. It can also be argued that, as it is likely that the site would come under the control of a United States Government Agency, U.S. foreign policy might end up restricting the spread and accretion of medical knowledge. The problem of peer review also remains difficult, and some would say subjective, and the storage of so much information electronically is technologically demanding though the next generations of computers with vastly augmented memories may be able to cope quite satisfactorily.

*Honorary Librarian of the College

THE LIBRARY

This is the background against which the College Library has constructed its current strategies. It is perhaps a useful simplification to say that the Library has two separate components, each with their own objectives. The first is the 'Modern Library', which uses information technology to provide Fellows and Collegiate members with information on modern medicine. This use of information technology means that our services (like rapid photocopying and literature searching) are not just available for those who can visit Queen Street but are there for the majority of Fellows and Collegiate Members wherever they live and work. The second component is the Historical Library. In 1681 the Fellows of the College started the practice of giving books and paper to the Library and, in this way, created a fine and irreplaceable medical collection. In 1999, scholars from many countries continue to come and use the works selected so many years ago and devoted to our tutelage and care.



Precious works on view.

MODERN SERVICES

Despite current or planned initiatives such as *E.Biomed*, the culling of relevant medical information on the Web can still be difficult. To help with this, the Information Librarian Alex Haig has developed a variety of search routes and he also runs regular courses on finding biomedical resources on the Web and on using Pubmed (the free Medline service). It is the intention of the Library to place the course documentation on the Fellows' and Collegiate Members' area of the Website in the near future. (In the meantime, please contact Mr Haig if you would like to attend one of the information courses or if you feel that you require help with your modern information needs. Email – a.haig@rcpe.ac.uk)

In 1999 the reading accommodation in the Front Library was improved. Alongside the computers, which allow access to the College catalogue and the Internet, a carefully chosen and comprehensive collection of current monographs is available. Visitors will find that there is a major textbook

on every specialty and each is less than three years old. This collection is reviewed annually. The journal list is confined to the core general medical and science journals including the *Lancet*, *BMJ*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Nature*, etc.

The Library plays a significant part in the ongoing development of rcpe.ac.uk – the College Website. Visitors to the Website will find a list of carefully-selected reading items which is intended to help with the task of keeping up to date. This list (prepared by a young Consultant Physician) provides some key practical references in each of the specialties- echoing the specialty theme discussed in the previous paragraph.

THE HISTORIC COLLECTION

Fellows and Collegiate Members will be aware that the New Library is one of the most beautiful features of the College. Less well known is its basement (known as the Annexe) which contains more than 1,000 periodical titles, including a significant amount of eighteenth-century material. The collection also contains long runs of major British, German, French and American journals stored on one and a quarter miles (1.845 km) of purpose-built shelving in atmospherically-controlled conditions. Annexe visitors – including the former Editor of the *BMJ* Dr Stephen Lock – have expressed delight at the extent of the collection which (apart from the complete *BMJ*) contains *The British Journal of Dermatology*, *the Edinburgh Medical Journal*, *Medical Essays and Observations*, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift*, *Pflügers Archive*, *Virchows Archive* and *Presse Médicale*.



Conservation in progress.

CATALOGUING

The cataloguing programme is coming on apace, and it is now easy to search for both the oldest and the most up-to-date books in the Library. This programme, which is largely supported by the Helen Russell Fund, will take the two cataloguers about five years to complete. One of the many offshoots of the cataloguing programme has been work on Sir Robert Sibbald's library-founding donation of three shelves of books. Thanks to the cataloguing project, the remaining books from this donation were recently

brought together. Details can be found in a pamphlet written by Mr John Dallas who has catalogued this part of the collection. The number of volumes now catalogued means that it will soon be feasible to make the catalogue available on the Website.

The Library still collects manuscript material, and has recently acquired professional and clinical papers from current Fellows. These twentieth-century records are important and complement our existing collections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century clinical material. The Library still accepts manuscript and monograph donations. Recently the College was fortunate to be given the fine neurological library built up by Kinnier-Wilson; as the College already housed the Ninian Bruce neurology collection it now has a very fine historical neurological section.

OUTREACH

The well-researched exhibitions put on by Joan Ferguson (Librarian from 1966-1993) were justifiably popular. This tradition is continued by the current Library staff, who use information technology to produce displays in a contemporary style. Exhibitions (often put on to complement symposia) are backed up with exhibition catalogues, and the Library staff produce pamphlets for visitors to take away. Recent exhibitions have benefited from the generosity of Dr Abdul Aziz Al-Hammadi, who funded the purchase of a scanning system that is linked to a CD recorder and a colour laser printer. This has allowed staff to use images from the College's historically significant or beautiful books as Internet illustrations on the College's Website or in exhibition pamphlets. The Library has also produced other publications including a guide to the Sir Robert Sibbald Physic Garden, and a listing of the Great Hall's pictures, statues and medallions.

Another outreach venture is a collaboration with Edinburgh University: The Edinburgh History of Medicine Group (which is chaired by Dr Sturdy, the Wellcome Award) is attracting good audiences for its seminars on the history of medicine which have included Sir David Weatherall's on *Science and the Quiet Art* and Sir John Crofton's on *The History of Tuberculosis*.

The College's 'oral history project' has also been a very worthwhile exercise. Lengthy interviews with senior Fellows have been filmed. The interviews give insights into the experiences of these eminent men and women as they discuss their upbringings as well as their university, military, professional and College lives. The videos allow viewers to see how the same event, for example – the creation of the Queen Mother Conference Centre is viewed from different standpoints.

Another new outreach venture is the sponsoring of a PhD student by the College. The student is Ms Loma Campbell, who will be working in the College Library as a result of the generosity of BUPA. Ms Campbell will be researching the 'historical influences on current attitudes to the relief of pain, suffering and symptoms in the care of individual at the end-of-life including euthanasia.' This project is primarily being overseen by Dr Sturdy and Dr Kenneth Boyd the College Cleric. The College is represented on the small supervisory committee by the Honorary Librarian and Dr Bryan Ashworth. In the near future, further collaborations are planned and the use of information technology will continue.