

rearranged seats at 8.30 pm there was another procession of robed splendour—I heard that the BMA's mace bearer had several practice runs to get the timing just right. The processing, badge exchanging, and platform ceremonial all proceeded smoothly, with Sir John Charnley receiving a warm burst of applause when the president awarded him the BMA's gold medal. The president, Professor Linford Rees, Cardiff-trained but now at

Barts, then delivered his address to that most difficult of audiences—part professional part lay. With an occasional light hearted aside he picked out for an attentive audience some salient points from current psychiatric advances. Intellectually fed, we all then trooped off in informal procession to the Museum of Wales next door to enjoy strawberries, wine, paintings, sculptures, and, for many, another late night.

FRIDAY

As I came past the reception desk next morning at 9.00 am a weary staff member yawned. I knew how he felt. But we had just four more hours to survive. (Though Council members had to endure that customary post-ARM meeting in the afternoon.) It was good to see Solly Wand at the rostrum, vigorous as ever, enjoying a standing ovation after presenting the report of Family Doctor Publications—a section of the BMA, incidentally, which does an excellent health education job with little fuss and at a steady profit.

We heard Dr J S Horner giving his account of the BMA's activities on behalf of community medicine doctors, Dr Alan Rowe reporting on the EEC, and Mr Michael Gilkes recounting in avuncular style the problems of ophthalmic medical practitioners—he almost had me weeping. They all had a good audience, as did Professor Frederick Fenech, President of the BMA's Malta Branch. He reported that most hospitals there are now staffed with Czech doctors and that the student worker's concept has been introduced into medical education (just as British nurses are trying to ditch it). It is certainly a sad time for Maltese medicine, which in 1976, the president told us, had celebrated the 300th anniversary of its medical school. He thanked the BMA for its support and was given a standing ovation. He deserved it, for I could not help wondering whether his public comments at Cardiff will bring retribution on his head in Valletta.

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Another aspect of international medicine had been discussed earlier. Under the section on the World Medical Association the meeting had unanimously urged the 32nd World Assembly "to condemn the use of psychiatry as a means of controlling political dissidents." Dr Horner's supporting speech for the proposal was particularly convincing. "I am a Christian and a Baptist," he declared "In the USSR people were being treated compulsorily by potent drugs on no other grounds than those two beliefs . . . confined in wards . . . in the care of people who had more in common with prison warders than with hospital nurses."

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Beside such grim tales from Malta and the USSR the problems of NHS priorities seemed almost trivial. Even so, the subject prompted some good, if predictable, speeches. But I was especially interested in the immediately preceding debate, on nursing. Though short it highlighted a serious problem in the NHS, "the increasing burden . . . on overworked nursing staff," and called for an urgent increase in trained nurses "who are directly concerned with the care of the patient." Mr Arnold Gourevitch, a Birmingham surgeon, eloquently condemned the standard of patient care as "downright dangerous." From Bromley, Dr D A Young criticised the top-heavy nursing administration and demanded more nurses on the wards. The meeting agreed with him. I hope that this will mean the BMA offering all possible support to the RCN in its efforts to improve standards of patient care. If ever there was a subject of common

concern between the two professions this must be it. Yet, strangely, the two organisations so often seem intent on paddling their separate professional canoes.

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The BMA was, in my view, greatly strengthened by this ARM. There were many sensible and constructive decisions on the BMA, the NHS and on medicine as a whole. The excellent standard of debate and the underlying sense of professional unity survived to the end. May the latter continue throughout the year. The quality of debates was greatly helped by the chairmanship of Alistair Clark, who concluded 12 years in the chairs (as deputy and as chairman) of the LMC Conference and the Representative Body. His dry Scots humour, understanding, and, when necessary, firmness ensured that the meeting's momentum was maintained—even during an outbreak of points of order, etc, on the final morning. He was warmly applauded by the representatives as he handed over his badge of office to Dr Brian Lewis, who cut his chairman's teeth on the Senior Hospital Conference. He is the first consultant to hold the post since before the second world war and the youngest chairman ever. We had flashes of his humour and of his steel throughout the meeting. We shall have more, I'm sure, in Liverpool next year.

SCRUTATOR

Photographs of the ARM were supplied by Neil Jones, Cardiff City Council.

Medical assistant contract

Work load survey

Negotiations have begun with the DHSS on a new contract for medical assistants and assistant dental surgeons. The Review Body has proposed that, to help them to price the contract, some aspects of the work load and responsibilities of medical assistants should be surveyed and the profession's representatives have agreed. The Office of Manpower Economics will carry out the survey and complete confidentiality of replies is guaranteed. The questionnaire will be sent to a sample of one in two in mid-July for return by 11 August. The Staff Side of the Joint Negotiating Committee hopes that each medical assistant who is selected will complete the questionnaire form as accurately as possible and return it by the closing date.

Correction

BMA negotiations

The footnote to the table on the success of the BMA's efforts in negotiations (8 July, p 140) is incorrect. The rates quoted in the table are those payable immediately—that is, on 1 April 1978—and are not, as the footnote stated, based on "fully up to date" rates in the Review Body's Eighth Report.