MEDICAL PRACTICE

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Society of Authors and its Medical Writers Group

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The Society of Authors, which celebrated its centenary last year, was founded by Walter Besant to promote the interests of authors and defend their rights. Besant was supported by well known writers of the day, including Matthew Arnold, Wilkie Collins, John Ruskin, and Charlotte M Yonge, and he was fortunate in securing Tennyson as the society's first president. This tradition of successful writers giving their time and energy in working for the profession has been maintained. Among the roll of honour of those who have assisted in activities and campaigns of the society are Shaw, Galsworthy, Hardy, Masfield, Forster, A P Herbert, and, of course, many well known contemporary authors. Bernard Shaw, ever valiant and tireless on behalf of his less successful colleagues, put succinctly the need for such a society:

When we begin writing, we are so poor and so busy that we have neither the time nor the means to defend ourselves against the commercial organisations which exploit us. When we become famous, we become famous suddenly, passing at one bound from the state in which we are, as I have said, too poor to fight our own battles, to a state in which our time is so valuable that it is not worth our while wasting any of it on lawsuits and bad debts. We all, eminent and obscure alike, need the Authors' Society. We all owe it a share of our time, our means, our influence.

In 1890 the society's journal *The Author* first appeared as a sixpenny monthly publication, with Besant as editor. In his opening editorial he explained that it was intended to be "the organ of literary men and women of all kinds" and that it was to become "the public record of transactions conducted in the interests of literature, which have hitherto been secret for want of such an organ." The journal has been published continuously ever since, although from 1919 as a quarterly. From 1961 until his recent death the journal was edited by Richard Findlater, associate editor of the *Observer* and eminent writer of theatrical history and biography as well as works about authorship. In his foreword to *Author! Author!*, a centenary anthology, he wrote: "The journal aspires to be informative, on occasions enlightening, even at times, with luck, entertaining. But its prime concern—now as in Besant's day—is the business and condition of authorship."

Copyright and contracts

The society's first major task was to get new copyright legislation and to broaden international copyright to include the United States, where British works had long been pirated. In 1886 Great Britain became a party to the Berne Convention and in 1891 the Chace Act in the USA (not a member of Berne) offered limited copyright protection conditional upon works by foreign authors being printed in the USA. It was not, however, until the UK Copyright Act 1911 was passed that an adequate domestic law was achieved, which in fact became the foundation of modern copyright.

Copyright is still a major preoccupation. The 1956 Act, which the society helped to promote, is now hopelessly out of date, and

for over a decade the society has striven to prod reluctant governments toward introducing comprehensive new legislation to deal with an explosion of technical developments—photocopying, taping, computers, cable TV, and satellites. The society has of course been concerned in promoting other legislation of benefit to writers—the Defamation Act 1952, the Obscene Publications Act 1959, tax concessions in various finance acts, and, after a stormy 28 year campaign, the Public Lending Right Act 1979.

The society has also worked continuously for better terms in publishing and established the norm of the royalty agreement, with a percentage calculated on the published price of the book. Not that long ago outright sales of copyright for pitiful lump sums were usual. According to Arnold Bennett, Andrew Chatto would say to a writer: "I am sorry, I like your book very much indeed, but I can't give you more than £25 for the copyright." The author would say, "Oh, but Mr Chatto that is very little," and he would reply, "I have the cheque in my pocket," and that would be that.

Things have certainly improved since then, and the society—now a trade union, although a fairly conservative one and not affiliated to the Trades Union Congress—has, with the Writers Guild, signed minimum terms agreements with BBC Publications and Faber and Faber and is negotiating with other publishers. Parallel with this trade union collective bargaining, there is pressure for better terms from members of the society. All are entitled to detailed clause by clause vetting of contracts for work in all media (not only books) and, armed with this, most authors manage to achieve worthwhile improvements on the terms originally offered.

The society's help and advice is not, however, confined to contracts. It covers virtually any problem connected with the business side of writing; and a series of pamphlets is available on publishing contracts, agents, libel, copyright, income tax, etc. In the event of serious dispute the society takes up cases for members (indemnifying them against costs) for breach of contract and copyright infringement, for example, where the risk and cost would preclude action by the author alone, and when issues of general concern to authors are at stake.

As the society grew (it has over 3000 members) and with the development of new media—radio and film in the 1920s, television in the 1950s—the membership broadened to include all categories of authors, and specialists groups formed to deal with the particular concerns of some of them—translators, writers for broadcasting, children's writers, educational writers, and technical writers.

Medical Writers Group

In 1977 Dr I J T Davies wrote an article in the *BMJ* suggesting the formation of a Society of Medical Authors.¹ He sent a circular to 3000 medical authors culled from the *Medical Directory* and had sufficient replies (over 1000) to organise a meeting at the Royal Society of Medicine, London, on 20 October 1978, and a working party was formed.²

At that meeting Victor Bonham-Carter, then joint secretary, put the case for medical authors to join the Society of Authors. An action committee (Professors Richard Schilling and Hugh Dudley, Mr R M Kirk, Drs Miles Weatherall and Beric Wright) was set up in March 1979. A meeting of 35 members of the Society of Authors at the Royal Free Hospital on 9 October 1979 agreed a draft constitution for a Medical Writers Group.³ Its objects are to represent its members in all matters affecting their interests as medical writers; to hold meetings to discuss matters of common

interest; and to provide through the society advice to members on the special problems of medical authorship. Once the group had been set up the working party, which had been considering the formation of a separate society of medical authors, recommended instead that medical authors should join the Society of Authors.

The second chairman of the Medical Writers Group was Professor Hugh Dudley, 1980-3, and the third Dr Thomas Bewley, 1983-4. The group held its first seminar in May 1981 on publishing contracts, and afterwards produced its *Guidelines for Authors of Medical Books*, with practical advice on publishers and their services, on precontract negotiations, artwork, sponsors, conferences, series, and so on. The Society of Authors supplies its members with a *Quick Guide to Publishing Contracts* and the medical group has a set of *Supplementary Notes* dealing with the particular problems of individual and multi-author medical works, conference proceedings, and articles in learned journals. The guidelines are revised periodically as new problems arise and in the light of comments by authors and publishers. These publications illustrate the value of a specialist group getting together well known writers in a particular field, identifying common problems, and, with the expertise available within the society, advising on how these may best be resolved. The society operates effectively only when there is this two way flow between its members and its committees and officials.

A further seminar in 1981 dealt with illustrations in medical books, putting the separate points of view of author, illustrator, and publisher. In 1982 the group held a joint meeting with the Medical Journalists Association on new medical information and its release, with the vigorous and often opposing viewpoints of the clinical scientist, the doctor interested in communication, and the medical journalist. Also in 1982 a workshop on medical writing had contributions from authors, publishers, and editors. The 1983 meeting discussed the surfeit of medical textbooks, again with opposite positions taken by authors and publishers. Last year's meeting discussed the pros and cons of sponsored symposia.

One of the objects for which the group was founded was "to promote the highest professional standards in medical writing." The committee thus conceived the idea of setting up a prize for a medical book. It was something of a triumph, therefore, when in 1983, thanks to the generosity of Abbott Laboratories Ltd and the help of the chairman, Gavin Hearn, the first £1000 Abbott Prize for Medical Writing was awarded to Raymond Parkes for the second edition of *Occupational Lung Disorders*, published by Butterworths. A special £250 runner up prize was given that year to Peter Cotton and Christopher Williams for *Practical Gastro-intestinal Endoscopy* (Blackwell Scientific). The 1984 prize went to Andrew W Rogers for *Cells and Tissues: An Introduction to Histology and Cell Biology* (Academic Press). The closing date for the 1985 prize is 30 June. Any medical textbook in English and published in the United Kingdom in 1984 with no more than three authors or editors may be submitted by a publisher. The judges are the committee of nine, whose own books are of course ineligible.

The Medical Writers Group now has 137 members. We should like to double this number.

We are indebted to previous chairmen and committee members for all their hard work for the group.

References

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- 3 Anonymous. Medical Writers Group. *Lancet* 1979;i:863.