A Common Goal?

Like the hero—or villain—in the old-fashioned silent movie serials the General Medical Council crisis regularly teeters at the edge of the cliff but never quite falls off. So it was in the latest episode when the B.M.A. Council met specially last week (Supplement, p. 29) to discuss the report of the Joint B.M.A./G.M.C. Working Party on the G.M.C.'s functions (Supplement, p. 33). Two facets of the G.M.C., its constitution and its finance, have already been studied and the results broadly accepted by the profession. The latest study, a working party set up in July and chaired by Sir Ronald Tunbridge, has been seeing whether the differences between the G.M.C. and the B.M.A. about the former's functions are narrow enough to be resolved within the profession.

According to the report differences exist but the working party saw them as "capable of resolution by further detailed discussions." Its members had faced a tight timetable as the Representative Body in approving the study in July had set a deadline of six months for an agreed report. Sir Ronald Tunbridge explained to the Council that while the discussions ranged over many subjects (listed in appendix C of the report) he and his colleagues had dealt in principle with certain broad areas. These were registration; the pre-registration year; registration of overseas doctors; specialist registration; the cost of registration; undergraduate medical education; professional discipline; and communication with the profession. Though described by one Council member as "talk about talks," the report has served a useful function in clearing the decks for more detailed discussions. By a large majority the Council decided that progress so far justified a move forward to such discussions. This decision was helped, no doubt, by the news from Mr. Walpole Lewin that he expected no erasures from the Register until December—several weeks later than the Council had thought likely at its last meeting.

This extra breathing space should help, though the B.M.A. Council will make a final decision on whether it thinks the R.B.'s conditions have been met on 22 November, when it will have the reaction of the full G.M.C. (meeting on 9 November) to the joint report. If the G.M.C. reacts unfavourably or is thought to be procrastinating then the B.M.A. is likely to endorse the call for a public inquiry made in October by some members of Council. Other medical bodies have already publicly called for such an inquiry but Sir Keith Joseph, dealing recently with a Parliamentary question asking whether he would hold a Government inquiry into the G.M.C., showed that he was awaiting the outcome of the joint discussions before deciding "what further action, if any, is required concerning doctors threatened with removal . . ."