QUALITY IN HEALTH CARE

Foreword

Raising Quality in the NHS, a conference organised by the BMA, King's Fund Centre, the *British Medical Journal*, and *Quality in Health Care* was held on 18 March 1992 and marked the launch of *Quality in Health Care* – a new journal produced by the BMJ publications group.

The programme, which reflected the outlook of the new journal, embraced the philosophy and theory of quality improvement initiatives and the experiences of clinical practitioners and managers working at the practicalities of improving quality of care within the NHS. The chief medical officer and those charged with setting national standards and monitoring quality within the NHS shared their views from the centre. The final session looked towards the future developments.

The vitality of the conference owed much to the range and depth of questions and discussion by an audience able to provide a broad view of the issues of quality in health care. Clinical, non-clinical, academic, and consumer interests were represented by the 400 participants who included nurses, therapists, audit facilitators, managers, and members of community health councils as well as surgeons, physicians, and general practitioners.

One theme which emerged was the need for cooperation and understanding between the various professional groups if any sense is to be made of the work being done to clarify those aspects of care which contribute to its quality and if our consumers are to derive any benefit from all the effort being put into the business of improving it. One of the first challenges is to find out the assumptions we hold. The need for audit meetings attended by only doctors was firmly challenged during the conference, and the myth that medical and

nursing audit groups exist to “bolster and cosset people from bad practice and criticism” was gently exploded.

The conference was also reminded that the group central to all that is done in health care – consumers – was not officially represented and not included in the list of speakers. Even in the process of creating the programme for a conference which attempted a broad view of the quality of care, patients were not given a voice.

The papers from the addresses given at this conference are published in this first supplement to *Quality in Health Care*. The leading paper is by Professor Don Berwick, who gave the keynote address at the conference. Drawing on his experience as a paediatrician, he explored continuous quality improvement as the philosophy more likely both to promote improvement in the quality of care and to engage all health care workers in the process of quality improvement than any system which relies on external inspection. He writes that British medicine is at a crossroads – between one path leading to a world of inspection where “measurement is the handmaiden of control” and another leading to a world of systematic improvement where “measurement and audit are the handmaidens of learning.” It is up to us to choose which path to take. The chief medical officer, Dr Kenneth Calman, in his paper gives us clear directions to take the path of opportunity and “seize the day!”

The conference organisers thank Glaxo Laboratories for generous sponsorship of the conference and this supplement, and all those who helped them to ensure a successful meeting.

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Editor