

125 Years Celebration

The Fiji School of Medicine: Changes in 1984

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The year 1984 was indeed a unique and somewhat sad occasion, for the last students were presented who would receive the Diploma of Surgery and Medicine (DSM) of the Fiji School of Medicine — an award which, over the years, has enabled very many talented, industrious and dedicated physicians to minister and care for the sick and to greatly improve the general standards of health of the citizens of almost every nation scattered in the vast Pacific Ocean.

After 1984, the School will be entering a brave new world in which its medical students will undertake an extended course of study, following which they will hopefully graduate with the full external MBBS Degrees and Honours of the University of the South Pacific.

Turmoil and Change

There can be no doubt that the year 1984 was one of considerable turmoil and change for the Fiji School of Medicine. That an unsatisfactory state of affairs has existed at the School for some considerable time, is no secret. The physical structure of the School has been neglected to an extent that some of its mould and vermin infested residential accommodation has now been condemned as uninhabitable. Much of its equipment and facilities have been allowed to run down and deteriorate until they are virtually useless. It has been starved of staff, and those who have valiantly remained to teach, have toiled under academic conditions which would hardly be tolerated elsewhere, even in the Third World. Its library, once proud, has been deprived of funds; its books and journals have been largely dissipated or have disintegrated with mould. In recent years, the School has been able to function only, one suspects, because of the cargoes of 'goodies' which have been deposited periodically on its doorstep by an extremely generous New Zealand; and with help from WHO and the United Kingdom.

It was inevitable under such circumstances, that deteriorating standards and morale would lead eventually to the generation of much heat and invective. Reports of numerous external assessors since 1971^{1 2 3 4} have repeatedly emphasised the intrinsic problems of the School; but it was not until the arrival of the present Minister and management, and the commissioning of the hard-hitting Hardy/Frank Report⁵ of 1983 from Australia, that the problems of the School eventually received

significant attention. It was long overdue.

The Hardy Report

It is a pleasure to report that, during 1984, most of the major changes recommended in the Hardy Report that were accepted, have been implemented. However, not all of the changes were welcomed universally — as I certainly learnt only too well to my own cost at one stage! Certain of the recommendations — such as the complete movement of the Pre-clinical School from Tamavua to Hoodless House, and the removal of the Para-medical Courses from the Fiji School of Medicine to the Fiji Institute of Technology — have been abandoned or at least deferred for the time being.

Probably the most significant change initiated by the Hardy Report involved the reorganisation of the administrative structure and lines of responsibility of the School. Our relationship with the University of the South Pacific on the one hand; and with the Public Service Commission/ Ministry of Health Complex on the other, has certainly been clarified.

A new Council was established with an independent Chairman and wider representative membership drawn from each of the major areas with which the School is involved. This was designed to allow increased participation in the decision making processes of the School. The responsibility of the Council as the supreme governing body of the School was clearly stated, but does seem to require re-emphasising from time to time — particularly to the Ministry of Health!

The Faculty Board replaced the existing Academic Committee with responsibility for the formulation of policies and recommendations on all matters affecting the academic and educational administrative functioning of the School.

Both the Medical School Council and the Faculty Board established a series of Standing Sub-Committees to deal with specific areas requiring special expertise such as Academic Appeals, Accommodation, Curriculum Review, Discipline, Dishonest Practices, Finance, Joint Appointments, Staff Advancement etc. Thus the organisational structure now corresponds more closely with that of the University of the South Pacific.

Perhaps one of the most important areas covered by the

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Medical Collection that records precisely what has happened in the medical history of this part of the world since the inception of medical services. We should, for example, be holding at least one copy of every issue of the **Fiji Medical Journal** that has ever been printed, but we don't. I regard such neglect as this as verging upon the criminal. I assure you we intend to do all we can to try and rectify the situation and reconstitute this collection of works describing what has been done in this part of the World; and we will be most grateful for any assistance that anybody can give us in this matter.

Apart from this area, however, I am happy to say that significant improvement has already occurred in the general library services since Chandraya and Mohan Lal took up their appointments with us. I hope this will continue next year with the movement of the Hoodless House Collection to new and more central premises in the Colonial War Memorial Hospital and the provision of on-line data retrieval services from Australia which will give us direct access to such data banks in Canberra as MEDLINE and BACK 80, and to the data stored in the computers of the National Drug Information Service, and that contained in the Central Poisons and Adverse Drug Reactions Registries.

Finally with respect to the Library, it is a pleasure indeed to record the assistance we have received from the US Peace Corps and the very generous help given us by such people as Caroline Salus Singh and Shirley Lyon; also Esther Williams and those other volunteers from USP and the other Libraries of Fiji who have given up so much of their free time and weekends to help us reorganise our library services. To all of them, we are deeply grateful.

Student counselling and discipline

The counselling and disciplining of our students has also been a matter which has exercised our minds frequently, for there have been numerous problems. Efforts to deal with these by the appointment of a part-time warden have, unfortunately, only been successful part of the time. But once again I am glad to say, our plight has been recognised by Ministry who have now provided us with a full-time Warden and student counsellor who hopefully, in 1985, will be able to deal with all of our problems all of the time!

Research

The research function of universities and medical schools is crucial both to their educational role and to the economic, intellectual and social progress of the community they serve. I regret to say that the research record of the Fiji School of Medicine, certainly in recent years, has not been good. It is not easy with extremely heavy clinical loads, with no research budget whatsoever and with a Ministry which, until recently, frankly discouraged it. Nevertheless, significant contributions have been made by such persons as Parshu Ram, Feroz Beg and Rajat Gyaneshwar. But the person who must most be singled out in this respect this year is Mr R V Krishnan, Senior Lecturer in Anatomy who, working alone and entirely unfunded at Tamavua, was able to produce a very significant hypothesis concerning the

growth of nerves after trauma which received widespread recognition after its publication in the *International Journal of Neuroscience*. I am glad to announce that his work has been rewarded by a direct Grant-in-Aid from New Zealand and an invitation to him to work for a time and gain further research expertise at one of the top neurophysiological research centres in Australia, at the Australian National University in Canberra. We wish him well in his endeavours. Such work as his must be encouraged if this School is ever to hold up its head in international company.

Sport and student affairs

The FSM Students Association has had an active and successful year. It organised a Walkathon which raised over \$1000 for miscellaneous student equipment. FSM once again defeated Lautoka Teachers College in the Annual Sports Competition; and our students took part in the First South Pacific University Sports Championship organised by USP where we did well to be defeated only in the Final by Massey University of New Zealand. We did, however, come out winners from the Hibiscus Soccer 'Knock-Out' Tournament.

Electives

I believe strongly that it is an important part of the education of students, particularly of those doing medicine, that they should be exposed to as wide a variety of educational and cultural experiences as possible during their course, so that they might better appreciate their roles in life in a broad perspective. Living as we do in Fiji — the way the World should be — it is easy to believe that the real World begins at the Lau Group and ends in the Yasawas! Perhaps it would be nice if it did, but it doesn't. Thus, we are trying to help our students widen their horizon by sending them overseas for a period on 'electives'. This is being made possible by the generosity of certain overseas donors to whom we are most grateful.

Parenthetically, this process was rather a disconcerting experience for one student who was due to go overseas in January, for he discovered that he just does not exist in Fiji. Apparently his birth was never recorded!

Academic Staffing

I cannot conclude this report without some reference to our academic staffing position. In a word, it has been quite atrocious. It is surely a matter of elementary principle that to teach, one must have staff; and that without staff, there is no School. We have 14 gardeners and cleaners on establishment, but only 5 permanent teaching staff — of whom only 3 have medical qualifications. None have graduated from a university!

I understand that this year was the first time for many years that the school has at least been able to find a tutor in every subject. I believe that some would regard this as a great improvement upon what has happened in the past; but I would hardly describe the situation in which the lecturer in physiology, for example, has to cope regularly with 25-28 student contact hours a week as being even remotely satisfactory.

For one to run even a minimum course in medicine, it is essential to have a stable staffing situation with an adequate number of properly trained and qualified teachers who are suitably remunerated and have sufficient tenure in their positions to be able to develop a course over several years. This we certainly do not have. Apart from the 5 local, tenured members of staff to teach approximately 125 students in the present 5-year course, we hope to be joined by another 8 or 9 full-time teachers. But the funding of these people, all of them expatriates, is still uncertain even although the 1985 Course Programmes are due to commence in the middle of January 1985; and even although one of them has been on our staff for 10 years!

For the Fiji School of Medicine to survive, it must have stable funding to provide stable staffing of good quality. In no way — and I would emphasise it — in no way can the School continue to exist as it has in the past on 'funny money' and 'cargo cult' funding. To attract and hold good, well-trained teachers, it must provide satisfactory working conditions including academic autonomy, adequate remuneration and support facilities, tenure (even if limited to only 3-5 years) and the normal conference, study leave and superannuation packages enjoyed by academic staff elsewhere. Without such, the School might as well close down.

However, I am very glad to say that I firmly believe that such changes are at last about to occur. There can be no doubt that since the present Minister of Health came to office we have seen substantial changes and improvements in the School. Many of these have come directly out of the Hardy Report which he was responsible for commissioning; but others I believe are arising from new attitudes and approaches in the Ministry which were not evident in the past, and I anticipate much more for the future.

In Conclusion

I cannot end without saying how much I appreciate all the very great help I and the School have received in so many

ways, from so many people and organisations throughout Fiji and overseas. Apart from all the staff at FSM, Administrative and Academic, both at Hoodless House and Tamavua, I must thank most sincerely all those who have given so freely of their time and expertise on our Council, Boards and Sub-committees. To the Chairman of our Council, Dr Tabua, I owe a particular 'Vinaka Vaka Levu' for his continued help, advice and unconditional support at all times which I have greatly valued. To those representatives from the University of the South Pacific who have never ceased to be sympathetic and understanding of our problems; to our friends in the Public Service Commission who have assisted us so much and shown me the short cuts through red tape and pinkstrings; to those who have supported us from such organisations as WHO and the US Peace Corps; and to the generous peoples and governments of New Zealand, Australia, Great Britain, the United States and Japan, I would say 'Thank you' for all your help. Finally, I would express our particular thanks to the Minister and Permanent Secretary for Health and Social Welfare and certainly, and by no means least, to Dr Filimone Wainiqolo who, by his almost infinite capacity for hard work, patience and sense of humour even under dire provocation, has done so very much in so short a time to advance the cause of the Fiji School of Medicine.

To those who left us at the end of 1984, we offer every wish for a happy, productive and fulfilling future.

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