

An Interview with Prof. M. J. Colbourne

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The Editorial Board



Professor M. J. Colbourne, M.B.,Ch. B., F.R.C.P. (Edin.), F.F.C.M.(F.R.C.P.), D.P.H was elected Dean of the Medical Faculty and from April 1978 onward he will be in office for the coming three years.

After being an adviser of malaria in the World Health Organisation in Western Pacific, Professor Colbourne became senior Lecturer in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Afterwards, in 1969, he took up the post of Professor and Head of the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health at the University of Singapore; in 1969, he was appointed Reader in Tropical Hygiene at the University of London, and served concurrently as the Assistant Director of the Ross Institute from 1970 to 1973. In 1974, he was appointed Professor in the Department of Community Medicine of H.K.U. Medical School. In 1978 he was elected as Dean of the Faculty.

Question: We are interested in anticipating the future planning of our faculty. Would you tell us your ideas?

Professor: At the moment, we must continue the existing developments that have already been started. The new curriculum will continue to be implemented; difficulties must be detected and corrections made. Another major objective is to make sure that the dental school gets off to a good start; although dentistry is a separate discipline it will affect the rest of the faculty and the medical students considerably; the latter can play an important part in making the dental school a success. The building up of a good relationship between this medical school and the future one in the Chinese University is also very important. The establishment of this new medical school and

the teaching hospital at Shatin will emphasize the problem of finding more medical staff at all levels and it may even worsen temporarily the shortage of medical staff in Hong Kong. These are the three major future developments, and of course all the ordinary routine work must go on. In particular, I am interested in the training of students for General Practice. This was recommended in the new curriculum but, up to now, not much has been done in Hong Kong. Other major fields of development are paediatrics and psychiatry.

Question: As you have been giving advice and help on the programmes and activities organised by the students, what do you see about these activities we organised?

Professor: Many students come and ask me for data and figures about health problems in Hong Kong but many also wish to get a wider view of the health in Hong Kong. I have always tried to encourage them and hope to continue to do so.

On the whole, these students are very keen and tend to have too big an idea of what they are able to accomplish in these sort of enquiries. I think it is better to have a narrower objective and to deal with it satisfactorily, than try to work too widely and superficially. Besides, organising surveys is difficult and requires specialised techniques, otherwise, results obtained may be misleading, I try to help students to clarify and narrow down their objectives. I am sure projects like the annual exhibition in the city hall and “China Week” are good and useful ideas.

Question: Do you expect the students participating in these activities?

Professor: I do encourage them doing so. Many of the students are eager to know things both about China and about society in Hong Kong, I think the initiative should come from the students themselves; the staff can give encouragement and help.

Question: Do you think the present examination system is putting too hard a burden on the students, especially those participating in extracurricular activities?

Professor: It depends on individual. After all some people enthusiastic in

extracurricular activities do pass their exams. Personally I think people should work steadily all the time rather than a mad rush at the last moment. One of the things we are trying to do in the new curriculum is to lighten the load of exams on the students.

Question: What do you think about the future quantity and quality of doctors in Hong Kong?

Professor: A report written by the Medical Development and Advisory Committee in 1973 concluded that there was a shortage of doctors in H.K. and recommended an increase in the number of doctors. This is essential unless other much more radical methods of providing primary medical care are attempted. The idea of introducing real family doctoring is difficult in the situation in Hong Kong, but, I hope, not impossible.

Question: Medical ethics are very hot questions. Do you think it is necessary especially to emphasize this in the curriculum?

Professor: It is very difficult to define medical ethics: there are many aspects. One side of medical ethics is to establish good relationships between patients and doctors. I am very doubtful about giving lectures and instructions on this subject in the curriculum. It is something not to be taught formally but rather for students to learn from observing what experienced doctors do. It is one of the objectives of the College of General Practitioners to raise the standard of general practice. In all countries, you find some doctors who do not behave well. It is rather a problem for the whole profession rather than just in the teaching and training of the students and I think medical teachers who are practising physicians are aware of this.