



# The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners

## *The development - Part 3*

**David Dammary, MA, MMed, DipVen, GradCertAddSt, FRACGP,**  
is Chair, Archives Committee, the RACGP Victoria, and is in general practice,  
Murrumbidgee, Victoria.

The Collings report was variously received by British general practitioners and specialists. A few members of the profession realised that a strong and well trained cadre of GPs was necessary to ensure good health for the public. It was the collaboration of these doctors that saw the first steps being taken toward the development of a college of GPs in postwar Great Britain.

### **The formation of the Royal College of General Practitioners**

In the years following World War II, general practice in Britain had reached an all time low. The war and the rise of specialisation had eroded general practice. The introduction of the National Health Service (NHS) by Aneurin Bevan in 1948<sup>1</sup> was intended to make medical services available to all, regardless of income. It certainly achieved that aim, but at great cost to general practitioner morale. This demoralisation of general practice became increasingly apparent. There were several reasons for this loss of GP morale.

First, as has been shown, after the introduction of the NHS, GPs found they had an increased workload with poorer working conditions. Many GPs left Britain during the 1950s to escape the NHS.<sup>1</sup>

Second, as Hunt pointed out: 'Many GPs felt lost without headquarters of

their own'.<sup>2</sup> This was similar to the situation a century before. Some GPs felt the British Medical Association (BMA) was no longer able to provide an overarching body for general practice. According to Hunt, many GPs also felt there was no control over their destiny or over the academic training of undergraduates.

Third, the Collings Report<sup>3</sup> further added to the discontent of GPs. Hunt's statement<sup>3</sup> that: 'There was a danger of ... many of the good standards of general practice being lost' needs qualification. Collings and others had shown the standard had been lost and needed to be regained.<sup>4</sup>

With all of these factors at work, the impetus to establish a college of GPs gained momentum. The American Academy of General Practitioners had been founded in 1947 as the first national organisation for general practice. It later changed its name to the American Academy of Family Physicians. In part it served as a model for the British College.<sup>5</sup>

Two reports to the BMA by Sir Henry Cohen, later Lord Cohen of Birkenhead, were a further stimulus. The first, published in 1948, recognised the need for better education for GPs.<sup>6</sup> The second<sup>7</sup> published in 1950 was more radical in that it 'proposed specific post-graduate training for general practice'. It was never ratified by the BMA.<sup>5</sup> Taken with the Collings report, the Cohen reports began the push for an academic body to represent GPs.

In 1950, a Section of General Practice was founded within the Royal Society of Medicine. This was perhaps the first sign for over a century of the recognition of general practice as a clinical discipline. According to Pereira Gray, the section was: 'A dress rehearsal for the foundation of the College', largely because many of the same men who began the Section were those involved in the formation of the College.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with this was a memorandum from Dr Fraser Rose to the BMA in June 1951.<sup>8</sup> Rose had served on the Cohen committee.

This memorandum could well be named the 'manifesto for general practice'. In it, Rose defines general practice and the special fields of the GP. Dr John Hunt also wrote a memorandum to the BMA.<sup>9</sup> The two men had never met before their meeting with the BMA but they shared a common bond.<sup>4</sup>

The real catalyst in the forming of a college came however, in October 1951. After their meeting with the BMA, Rose and Hunt wrote a joint letter to the British Medical Journal and the Lancet.<sup>10</sup> This has since become known as the 'Rose-Hunt letter'. The contribution of these farsighted men in the development of the Royal College of General Practitioners has been commemorated by our own Royal Australian College of General Practitioners through the Rose-Hunt Award. This award is bestowed on a person who, in the opinion of Council, has rendered outstanding service in promoting the aims and objectives of the RACGP.

## The birth of the Royal College of General Practitioners

A steering committee for the development of the Royal College of General Practitioners met in 1952. It consisted of five specialists and five GPs, including Rose and Hunt, under the neutral chairmanship of Henry Willink, a lawyer and academic, who had previously been Minister of Health. There had been a great deal of opposition from the presidents of the three royal colleges, especially from Sir Russell Brain, President of the Royal College of Physicians.

Despite this opposition and some apathy on the part of GPs, the Steering Committee continued to work toward the development of a college for general practice. On legal advice, the model chosen was that of an unincorporated association. That allowed for the creation of a college without much fuss and, effec-

tively, in secret.<sup>25</sup> By the time the Steering Committee's report was published in the British Medical Journal in December 1952, the Royal College of General Practitioners was already one month old. It was founded on the 19th November 1952.

The report of the Steering Committee was another landmark document.<sup>11</sup> It too was a manifesto for general practice. The most important part of the brief was 'to improve the quality, the art and the skill of general practice ... in the same way that the royal colleges have raised ... the standard of specialised practice.'<sup>5</sup>

Many had expected that GPs would be uninterested in paying fees to a college; many expected that GPs would not want to jump the hurdles of more examinations. Whatever the opposition from specialists and whatever the expected apathy from practitioners was; after three weeks, more than a thousand GPs had joined the new college each paying an entrance fee of ten guineas. After six months, the number was over two thousand.<sup>5</sup>

The first Annual Meeting of the fully formed College was held in November 1954. At this meeting William Pickles was installed as the first President of the College.<sup>2</sup> Pickles was a GP from the Yorkshire Dales whose work, *Epidemiology in a Country Practice*, published in 1939, was a classic in general practice research.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting, 50 years later, to look at these three men: Hunt, Rose and Pickles. Each in his own way typified British general practice at that time.

William Pickles was the son of a Leeds GP who had worked in the closed environment of the Yorkshire Dales, yet had produced world class research.

John Hunt was a London GP with specialist qualifications who chose general practice as his discipline. He had an Oxford doctorate in medicine, was a member of the College of Physicians and knew the workings of a specialist college.

He worked in a small group of private GPs, outside the NHS.

Fraser Rose was a GP in the industrial town of Preston in Lancashire. He had joined the NHS in 1948. In addition, he was a member of the Council of the BMA. The BMA had represented general practice for a century and Rose brought knowledge of the strengths and experience of that important body to the foundation of the College.

Rose and Hunt together must be regarded as the founders of the Royal College of General Practitioners. As we shall see in the next article, the RACGP is the lineal descendant of the RCGP.

## References

1. Dammary D. Medical fees: Medibank and Medicare. *Aust Fam Physician* 2002; 31(2):183-185.
2. Fry J, Hunt of Fawley J H H, Pinsent R J F H, eds. *A history of the Royal College of General Practitioners*. Lancaster: 1983.
3. Collings J S. General practice in England today: a reconnaissance. *Lancet* 1950; i:555-585.
4. Dammary D. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners: The development – Part 2. *Aust Fam Physician* 2002; 31(6):568.
5. Pereira Gray D J. Forty years on. The story of the first forty years of The Royal College of General Practitioners. *Atalink*, 1992.
6. British Medical Association. Sir Henry Cohen, Chairman. *The training of a doctor*. BMA, 1948.
7. British Medical Association. Sir Henry Cohen Chairman. *General practice and the training of the general practitioner*. BMA, 1950.
8. Rose F M. Memorandum on the importance of establishing a royal college of general practice. *Br Med J* 1951; (Suppl 2):173-175.
9. Hunt J H. A college of general practice. *Br Med J* 1952; (Suppl 2):175-176.
10. Rose F M, Hunt J H. A college of general practice. *Br Med J* 1951; ii:908; *Lancet* 1951; ii:943.
11. Hunt J H. A college of general practice. *Br Med J* 1952 (Suppl 1):335-339.
12. Pickles W N. *Epidemiology in a country practice*. Bristol: 1939. Republished London: RCGP, 1984.