

July: nominations invited

We were delighted to welcome another outstanding cohort of Fellows into the Academy on 24 June. The admittance of new Fellows rounds off the Academy's tenth election cycle. This year long process is the bedrock of our operations, involving hundreds of candidates, nominators, referees and committee members. We rely totally on the efforts of our Fellows to ensure the quality of candidates in the election pool, both in proposing new candidates and updating the papers of existing nominations. A full set of nomination papers are enclosed in this mailing - we look forward to receiving your proposals for outstanding individuals in your field, institution or elsewhere.

Finally, look out for an update on the project at 41 Portland Place in coming weeks. The update will include architectural plans, plus details of our campaign to raise the remaining £700,000 of necessary funds. Now that we have secured support from our major donors we are relying on Fellows to help us fill the final gap - you have been warned...

Helen Munn

Academy concern over revalidation reforms

In December 2008 a letter from Professor Sir Graeme Catto FRSE FMedSci, President of the General Medical Council, was sent to medical professionals to inform the community of the introduction of a new license to practice that would involve a regular process of revalidation. The implementation of revalidation has arisen from reports from the Chief Medical Officer and a Government White Paper on professional regulation.

There are many societal drivers behind the current revalidation reforms, particularly the importance of maintaining and strengthening public trust in the medical profession. In response the Academy's Clinical Academic Careers Committee, chaired by Professor Patrick Sissons FMedSci, is publishing a position paper to highlight the views of clinical academic staff to the organisations charged with the development and implementation of the revalidation reforms: the Department of Health, General Medical Council and the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. The Academy has engaged with all of these organisations during the development of the paper. We have also sought views from a range of medical constituencies who work outside of the NHS and across intra-professional boundaries with other healthcare sectors.

It has been questioned whether the emerging proposals for revalidation will achieve the desired objectives in a cost effective manner. While the aim of ensuring all practising clinicians remain up-to-date and competent within their area of clinical expertise is agreed by many, the complexity of the proposed processes could see excessive time spent monitoring doctors whose performance is already satisfactory.

The Academy is working to ensure the proposed system of revalidation does not have unintended consequences in limiting the scope, flexibility and mobility of the medical workforce, or compromise the UK's future ability to deliver high quality clinical research and excellent patient care. The position paper will be available at www.acmedsci.ac.uk/publications



Genomics and world health: a flicker of light on the horizon

Sir David Weatherall FRS FMedSci, Regius Professor of Medicine Emeritus, Oxford University

Following the announcement of the partial completion of the Human Genome Project in 2001 it was widely predicted that within the next twenty years this remarkable achievement would lead to a complete change in medical practice as we know it, news which came as something of a surprise to the international health community. The then Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Gro Harlem Brundtland, invited me to act as lead writer on a report for the WHO on the impact of genomics in world health. The report dealt with the extremely common monogenic diseases that affect children in the developing countries, the potential value of DNA diagnostics and technology for the control of communicable disease, the value of a better understanding of genetic risk factors for common non-communicable diseases, and the potential importance of pharmacogenetics in rationalising the use of new drugs, particularly in poorer countries. In summarising the ethical and political basis for how best the new technology of genomics might be introduced into the developing countries, particular emphasis was placed on the importance of the further development of North/South and South/South partnerships between universities and other research institutions.

The report was accepted as WHO policy, and at the 59th World Health Assembly the common inherited anaemias were formally recognised as a world health problem. Not surprisingly, no action whatever has followed, and governments, NGOs and many international funding bodies continue to focus almost entirely on communicable disease. However, some concerns are being raised about the huge increase in certain non-communicable diseases, diabetes for example, in countries that are going through an epidemiological transition characterised by improved public health measures, better living standards, and the mixed advantages of exposure to high-energy westernised diets. The remarkable differences in the rates of increase of these diseases between different ethnic groups suggests exposure to new forms of diet set in backgrounds of variable genetic susceptibility.

There is a flickering of light on the horizon however. Late in 2007 the next Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries and Risk Factors (GBD) study was announced under the auspices of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington, the Johns Hopkins University, the University of Queensland and the WHO. This programme is designed to analyse all the common diseases across the world and to determine their health burden in a similar way to previous exercises of this type, pioneered by Christopher Murray and Alan Lopez, and which have had an important impact on the evolution of health services in both the developed and developing countries. After much not-so-gentle prodding and greatly to my surprise, for the first time some genetic diseases, that is the inherited disorders of haemoglobin, were included in the programme. Hence a group of us are attempting to compile information about the frequency and health burden of these conditions.

During recent discussions in Seattle about the progress of the GBD initiative, the question of whether it should include genetic risk factors for common communicable and non-communicable diseases was raised. Given the wide knowledge of this topic among Fellows of the Academy, this project seemed custom built for the Academy and the appropriate Fellows were contacted to ask if they could supply information of this type for their particular fields. The initial response has been quite remarkable and excellent data are being accumulated to be included in the GBD programme.

This particular aspect of global health seems to be ideally suited to the future work of the Academy and it is very encouraging to see the splendid response to this request from the GBD organisers. It is an area that could be further developed by meetings, reports, and international partnerships, all of which have the potential for being of considerable help to the global health community in understanding this complex field. Though still in its infancy it has great potential for health-care research in the future; the GBD organisers were wise to include it at this early stage.

New Director of Medical Science Policy

Dr Rachel Quinn joined the Academy as Director, Medical Science Policy in June. Rachel was previously Head of Strategy, Science Policy Centre, Royal Society and joins the academy at an exciting time for our policy activities. Projects on ageing and the benefit and harms of medicines are due to report at the end of the summer and there is funding for a new project on animals containing human material in the pipeline. Rachel is interested to hear suggestions from Fellows of further policy activities for the Academy to take forward and can be contacted on rachel.quinn@acmedsci.ac.uk or 020 7969 5305.

New publications

Hype, hope and hybrids: science, policy and media perspectives of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill



Hype, hope and hybrids
Science, policy and media perspectives of the
Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill
Edited by Dr Geoff Watts (FMedSci)

The passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill through Parliament is an interesting example of how the collective voice of the scientific community can have a positive impact on political and media debates. A new booklet, by the Academy of Medical Sciences, Medical Research Council, Science Media Centre and Wellcome Trust, presents a collection of essays that bring together personal reflections on the debate and documents how scientists engaged differently to present the case for hybrid embryos.

The booklet is edited by Geoff

Watts FMedSci, with contributions from Mark Henderson, the Times, Fergus Walsh, BBC medical correspondent, Fiona Fox, Director of the Science Media Centre, Professor Martin Bobrow FRS FMedSci, Professor Peter Braude FMedSci and Sir Mark Walport FMedSci. The booklet also contains an analysis of the print media's coverage of hybrid embryos throughout the Bill's development undertaken by the Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. It is available for download at <http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/index.php?pid=101&puid=151>

Genome-wide association studies: understanding the genetics of common disease

A new report of a meeting held by the Academy's FORUM with industry on genome-wide association studies highlights the need to build capacity to process the vast amounts of data generated by these studies, and to develop mechanisms of responsible data sharing to accelerate the translation of knowledge into patient benefits. The report was launched to coincide with the publication of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee report on Genomic Medicine and prompted coverage in the Times and Independent. Further information can be found at <http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/p114.html>

Symposium report - Translating new research into clinical practice

In February the Academy and the School of Medicine, University of Southampton held a joint symposium, 'Translating new research into clinical practice' at the Wessex Heartbeat Centre, Southampton General Hospital. Coordinated by Professors Freda Stevenson FMedSci and Stephen Holgate FMedSci, the day highlighted research from Southampton-based Fellows of the Academy and colleagues within two key themes: 'Epigenetic and environmental influences on disease' and 'Immunity and inflammation'. A summary report of the day is now available at www.acmedsci.ac.uk/publications

Patient records in medical research



Since the publication of our 2006 report, 'Personal data for public good: using health information in medical research' the Academy has been a consistent voice in debates on the use of patient records in research. In particular Professor Graham Watt FMedSci, a member of the Academy's original working group, has participated in the development of a report to identify best practice guidance to help ensure GPs and patients have confidence in the process used to access patient information.

The report was published by the Wellcome Trust in July and has since been endorsed by the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners among others. It can be downloaded from <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Policy/Spotlight-issues/Personal-information/GP-records/index.htm>