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Minutes of the 22nd Annual General Meeting
held on 28th October 2010
at the Medical Society of London, Chandos St, London W1

PRESENT:

Caroline Addy, David Bender, Louise Bewley, Susan Bewley, Kenneth Bodman, Walli Bounds, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, Kenneth Chan (student prize winner), David Colquhoun (award winner), Mrs D. Colquhoun, Seton During, Annabel Ferriman, John Garrow, John Hanford, John Illman, Jenny Isaacson, Keith Isaacson, Fred Kavalier, Robert Lansdown, Vincent Marks, Heather May, James May, Peter May, Claire Parke (student prize winner), Mandy Payne, Elizabeth Pygott (Medico-Legal Society), Anne Raikes, Caroline Richmond, Gillian Robinson, Les Rose, Nick Ross, Sarah Sneller (student prize winner), Dick Taverne, Janice Taverne, Gillian Tindall, Jeff Watts, Robert Wilcox, Sion Williams (student prize winner), Clive Woolf

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:

Joan Gandy, Lord Walton

The meeting was opened by the President, Nick Ross, who welcomed all members of HealthWatch, and also Elizabeth Pygott from the Medico-Legal Society. He paid tribute to John Garrow, Caroline Richmond and Vincent Marks, all founder members of HealthWatch, who were retiring from the committee.

MINUTES OF THE 21ST AGM AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes had been published on the web and were accepted as a true record of the meeting. There were no matter arising.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: JAMES MAY

We have had a busy and on balance successful year, though not without considerable setbacks. I am as ever very grateful to everyone who has contributed to the work of HealthWatch over the past year and in particular to the work of the committee. Keith Isaacson is our vice chairman, and Gillian Robinson has been our secretary who is resigning from this post this year, but remaining on the committee. I am very grateful for all her work over several years. Anne Raikes looks after our finances, and other members are David Bender, Susan Bewley, Walli Bounds, Diana Braham's, Malcolm Brahams, John Illman and Les Rose and Vincent Mark's was co-opted onto the committee. With are very sorry that both John Garrow and Caroline Richmond will stop serving on the committee this year. John is the longest standing HealthWatch committee member who has contributed his wisdom and devastating incisive wit and clarity of thought to meetings and the newsletter. Caroline's was one of the founder members of HealthWatch who first conceived of the need to challenge the increasing numbers of bogus health claims in the eighties and nineties. She has continued to be one of a rare breed of journalists who truly understands and can communicate science to the public. She is rarely short of ideas and wisdom. Fortunately both will continue to contribute to committee email discussions as well as the Google group, but we will inevitably feel the loss and wish them both well.

In addition to our committee members we are very grateful to Ken Bodman our membership secretary.

The newsletter has continued to be a high quality publication thanks to Mandy Payne's editorial skills and Caroline Addy who is the barrister who proof reads the text for libel for which we on the committee are very grateful indeed. The newsletter is circulated to journalists and members of HealthWatch.

The student prize is awarded for the ranking of clinical protocols to promote skills in evidence based medicine amongst medical and nursing students. We are very indebted to Walli Bounds and Gillian Robinson for producing the protocols and for deciding on winning entries. We are also grateful to David Bender for publicising the prize.

The website continues to be well used and remains at the top of the google search engine despite the present government giving a new Quango our name despite protests from us.

We are also very grateful to members who contribute to the work of HealthWatch. We are grateful for newsletter articles, Google group contributions and taking part in any of a variety of projects which we are involved in.

Being a member of the Google group is a good way of keeping up to date and finding out how you can help us in achieving our aims.

As I suggested at the beginning there have been considerable challenges in the last year.

Edzard Ernst and the Prince of Wales:

The biggest blow was early in the year to find that Edzard Ernst's department of Complementary Medicine faces closure. On the 3rd of March the Times reported that, "One of the world's leading centres for alternative medicine research is facing closure for lack of money after a row with a senior aide to the Prince of Wales." The exact nature of this intervention is not clear.

Less than 2 months later on 1st of May the Times reported. "A charity founded by the Prince of Wales to promote a holistic approach to medicine and greater use of homeopathic treatments is being shut down, it was announced yesterday, days after a former senior official was arrested in a fraud investigation."

The foundation has been at the forefront of promoting alternative medicine in the face of the evidence and we are not sorry to see it close, but the loss of the enormous output and influence of high quality research by Edzard's department means is great blow.

Simon Singh, Peter Wilmshurst and Libel Laws:

In April the British Chiropractic Association dropped their libel case against Science writer Simon Singh. The case highlighted the need for reform of Libel laws and HealthWatch members wrote to MPs and signed a petition for reform which is currently under review. For further information please see: <http://www.libelreform.org/>.

We continue to support Peter Wilmshurst with our whistleblowers support fund in defending a libel case from NMT medical. On the 30th November or 1st of December NMT medical are due in court to demonstrate that if they pursue the case and lose that they have the funds to pay his costs.

What has become apparent is from these cases is that even if the whistleblower wins his case he is unlikely to be able to claim more than about 70% of very substantial costs, and cannot claim for the enormous time and stress involved over months and years. For these reasons we will continue to run our support fund for Peter Wilmshurst and others like him who the committee feels merit such support.

Science and Technology Committee report and the new Government:

Despite pre-election claims to support evidence based medicine the coalition government have ignored the advice of the science and technology committee report on Homeopathy and have decided not to close existing services, and to allow individual clinicians to refer to homeopaths if they feel this is helpful. They assert that clinician's are bound to the GMCs code of conduct and that therefore they are responsible for prescribing evidence based and cost effective medicine. HealthWatch members wrote to Andrew Lansley and other MPs to point out that this is an irresponsible use of public money in a time of financial cutbacks, but these were comprehensively ignored by those in power.

Breast Screening:

Since a review of Breast screening in the BMJ pointing out the many difficulties with the national screening programme HealthWatch under the lead of Michael Baum and Hazel Thornton have had a letter published in the Times asking that the public be offered informed choice regarding the

programme rather than the uncritical information currently supporting it.

The Consumer Protection scandal:

John Garrow and Les Rose have been pursuing Trading Standards since using the Freedom of Information Act to find that since the introduction of the new structure for complaints in 2008 there have been no prosecutions for misleading claims for health products. Les put together a protocol for a study to test the effectiveness of Trading Standards under the current system with 15 participants complaining about 3 products which have unsubstantiated claims. The trial is ongoing and is producing very interesting responses from the vendors of the products and from Trading Standards officials.

This is a brief selection of some highlights from the past year. Most of these items and others have been reported in the newsletter. There is a constant need for help from HealthWatch members who can easily join the Google group and become actively involved in some of these projects.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT: KENNETH BODMAN

I always wonder when making these yearly reports if I should try and pad them out to a couple of pages to make the facts more interesting but I would need a Sir Humphrey Appleby and then you would think gosh isn't this job fascinating, but the simple facts are that membership has remained steady and although three members did not renew their membership this year we did receive four new members so the present membership stands at 135, one up on last year.

Well over a third of the membership now receive the newsletter by email and I now have 107 email addresses which for making contact for any reason will be quicker and cheaper for HealthWatch.

We have 109 members now signed up through the gift aid scheme which I am sure pleases Anne Raikes.

10 Students graduated this year and David has contacted them about joining up for full HealthWatch membership but so far as I am aware no one has replied.

Current Student membership of HealthWatch stands at 34.

Sadly we lost two long standing members this year: Miss Enid Allen who joined in 1997 and came regularly to the AGM, and Mr Paul Ratcliffe who I once spoke to on the phone and told me he was a retired farmer and had no medical knowledge but found the newsletters of great interest. He also joined in 1997.

TREASURER'S REPORT: 12 MONTHS ENDED 31st MAY 2010: ANNE RAIKES

The Balance Sheet and Statement of Financial Activities for the period 1st June 2009 to 31st May 2010 are available at the AGM and/or a complete copy of the Financial Statements if required.

As in previous years, the major part of our total expenditure of £5,333 (2009:£5,158), is incurred in producing and distributing the Newsletter (four each year).

Members of the Committee continue to give their time and effort at no cost to HealthWatch. Income from subscriptions was £4,206 (2009: £4,141). Subscriptions, together with the Gift Aid tax rebate, continue to cover the cost and distribution of the Newsletter and other membership costs but only by a small margin. There was a small net surplus for the year of £166.

During the year £1,040 (2009: £1,140) was expended on the HealthWatch Student Prize. The accounts show the Ajahma funds separately from general HealthWatch funds. There remained £713 in this account at end May 2010 which will be used towards this year's prize. We are fortunate that the Medico-Legal Society has generously agreed to support the continuation of the Healthwatch annual awards to promote the teaching of healthcare undergraduates in critical evaluation of clinical research

protocols.

Whistle blower Support Fund.

A further £2,940 was raised for the Whistle blower Support Fund in the year to 31st May 2010, which together with related Gift Aid Tax Refund increased the fund by £3,754. The total now raised has reached £12,649.

The Accounts show a profit this year of £166 (excluding the restricted Ajhama related activity and the WhistleBlower Support Fund), which is down from last year's surplus of just £1,076. This drop in net income is the result of lower interest rates on invested reserves and the fact that there were no general donations in this last year. Healthwatch need to maintain its level of reserves, not only for the Newsletter but also in case of libel defence (insurance being impractical) and for future projects that the Committee would like to implement given sufficient funds.

Healthwatch reserves, excluding the Ajama Fund, totalled £16,306 at end May 2010, the bulk of which is held in a COIF Charities Deposit Fund. However, in an environment of very low interest rates, the return from this deposit has dropped significantly.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

There being no other nominations, the following were elected unopposed:

Chairman: James May

Vice Chairman: Keith Isaacson

Treasurer: Anne Raikes

Secretary: David Bender

Committee members: Susan Bewley, Walli Bounds, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, John Illman, Gillian Robinson, Les Rose. Nick Ross noted that there is a need for new blood on the committee and urged members who are interested in serving to contact the Secretary, with a view to cooption onto the committee.

AMENDMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION

The draft revised constitution had been circulated to members with the July Newsletter; the main changes concerned student membership and a reduction in the number of committee meetings from 8 to 6 per year, since much business can now be conducted by email. Malcolm Brahams proposed, and David Bender seconded, approval of the revised constitution, and the motion was carried *nem con*.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Les Rose outlined the changes in consumer protection law and made a plea for members to get involved in the campaign and research protocol about the CPTR, as well as signing up to the Google email group. Three products are being considered: seaweed extract for slimming, Boots detox and shark cartilage; a research fellow in the Dept of Complementary Medicine at the University of Exeter had confirmed that there was no evidence of efficacy for any of these products. The manufacturers had been asked for evidence for the claims made, but to date none had been received, and complaints have been made to Trading Standards Officers.

Peter Wilmshurst gave an update on the progress of the libel case against him; on November 30th and December 1st NMT Medical will have to attend court and demonstrate that they have funds to pay costs should the case go against them. He thanked HealthWatch members for their support through the Whistle Blowers' fund and noted that if the case goes to trial his costs will be of the order of £3.5 million.

STUDENT PRIZE

Nick Ross welcomed Elizabeth Pygott, President of the Medico-Legal Society, who are generously

supporting the student prize for the next three years. Ms Pygott thanked HealthWatch for the invitation to the AGM and honorary membership. She said that the Medico-Legal Society, whose charitable objective is the promotion of all aspects of medico-legal education, was pleased to sponsor the student prize, and explained why the Medico-Legal Society was sponsoring the student prize.

STUDENT PRIZE REPORT: WALLI BOUNDS

On behalf of HealthWatch, I should like to thank the AJAHMA Trust for having provided the funding for this competition, which has enabled us to run it for a ninth consecutive year, and which has now been exhausted.

HealthWatch is fortunate in having secured sufficient funding from the Medico-Legal Society to enable the competition to continue for a further three years, for which we are most grateful.

Aim:

The aim of this competition is to see whether medical and nursing students have acquired the skills needed to critically appraise clinical trial protocols, and hence to assess the validity of research findings. Often, claims for efficacy or safety of healthcare treatments published in the medical/lay press and on the internet are, on closer examination, based on poorly designed clinical trials that could not possibly support the stated claims, and it is vitally important for our future doctors and nurses, who will base their judgements and clinical decisions on research findings, to be able to distinguish the 'wheat from the chaff'.

Method:

Students are invited to appraise four 1-page long hypothetical research protocols, and to rank them on a scale of 1 – 4 (1 = best, 4 = worst) according to which one is most likely to provide a reliable answer to the stated aim of the trial. The protocols contain varying degrees of scientific, methodological and ethical flaws, (eg no control group, or no informed consent), which the students are expected to identify and comment upon. They are required (using no more than 600 words) to explain their reasons for assigning their ratings and suggest ways in which the protocols could be improved. Their replies are then compared against the pre-assigned ranking from the judges.

Administration:

The competition is open to all medical and nursing students in the UK and is coordinated by Professor David Bender. He notifies all medical and nursing colleges early in the year, collects the entries, sends the anonymised entries to the judges, and notifies all participants of the results. In addition, he personally contacts staff at selected medical schools, encouraging them to bring the competition to the attention of their students. His contribution, together with Professor John Garrow's continuing role of scientific advisor, and arbiter (in case of non-agreement by the judges), are crucial to the success of the competition, and the judges thank them for their much valued support.

Results:

Information flyers were distributed electronically to all medical and nursing colleges and also to the Council of Deans of Nursing. A total of 64 entries were received (slightly more than the 50 in 2009), including two from nursing students.

Only about 50% (30 students) had rated the protocols in the correct order, sadly none of them nurses, and these 30 then underwent detailed scrutiny by the judges, to assess the depth of their understanding of correct clinical trial design. The judges paid particular attention to see whether students identified design weaknesses, such as absence of, or unsatisfactory, control group; no patient and/or assessor blinding; and ethical issues. They assessed the entries independently of each other with the aid of a 13-point check-list and then compared their results and tried to reach agreement.

Although a larger proportion of entries had ranked the protocols in the correct order compared to last year, the judges were somewhat disappointed with students' generally unimpressive reasoning for assigning their chosen ranking. Aspects of less scientific importance were often given more prominence than crucial omissions, such as lack of controls or blinding. We observed with interest that, for example, in assessing the 'Support tights...' protocol, nearly all students expected the results to be invalid, because the trial sponsor (a Primary Care Trust) would make a financial saving, if the

results showed the wearing of such garments to reduce the need for surgery, yet few remarked on why this protocol was scientifically the 'worst' of the four. Others gave their replies in the form of ticking boxes in published 'Trial Design Tables', which did not always convince the judges of a student's sound understanding of important design features. There were of course exceptions, as shown by our winner and runners-up, who deserve our praise and respect, but overall, the competition highlights the need for better teaching of research methodologies in our medical and nursing colleges.

Again, the judges were disappointed and concerned that most students failed to comment on the absence of ethics committee clearance and of informed patient consent in some of the protocols, despite specific instructions to identify important omissions. This is most disturbing and raises the question of whether medical and nursing training pays much attention to ethical issues in clinical trials; a concern that no doubt many of you will share.

The poor response from nursing students is most disappointing, as is the fact that none of their entries was of sufficient quality to merit a prize.

Prize presentation:

I should now like to invite our President to hand out the prizes to the winners and runners-up, who are:

Medical Students

Winner: Sian Williams

Cardiff

Runners-Up: Claire Parker
Corinne Locke Ross Mirvis
Kenneth Chan Sarah Sneller

Aberdeen Cardiff Imperial College London Barts and the
London Cardiff

HEALTHWATCH AWARD 2010

The HealthWatch award for 2010 was made to Prof David Colquhoun for his determined exposure of improbable science. He gave an interesting and entertaining talk entitled "How the web has turned the tables on pseudo-science". The text of his address will be published in the Newsletter.