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HealthWatch

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Minutes of the 23rd Annual General Meeting
18th October 2011
The Medical Society of London, Chandos St, London W1

1) Present:

Nick Ross (in the chair), David Bender, Kenneth Bodman, Walli Bounds, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, Colin Brewer, Susan Bewley, Kenneth Chan, Larisa Corda, Brian Deer (Award winner), Roger Fiskien, John Garrow, Alan Garrow, Derek Ho (student prize winner), Jenny Isaacson, Keith Isaacson, John Illman, Jennifer Johnson (student prize winner), Mark Loughrey (student prize winner), Madeleine McCormack, John McCormack, Philippa Pigache, Anne Raikes, Gillian Robinson, Les Rose, Oliver Samuel, Geoff Watts, Peter Wilmshurst, Yvonne Yeung,

2) Apologies for absence:

Debra Bick, James May, Mandy Payne, Caroline Richmond, Bethan Riley, Dick Taverne, Gillian Tindall

3) Minutes of the 22nd AGM (2010) had been posted on the website; there were no matters arising.

4) Chairman's report (in the absence of James May due to illness this was read by Keith Isaacson)

With the advent of quality blogs such as David Colquhoun's DC science, and with related organisations such as sense about science it can sometimes feel that the usefulness of HealthWatch is being eclipsed. However, we continue to be busy, and make an impact in all sorts of ways, and it seems that we are able to pool resources and collaborate very effectively.

I am of course grateful as ever to everyone who has contributed to HealthWatch over the last year directly or indirectly, and particularly to the work of the committee.

Keith Isaacson, our new chairman, has been a friendly and supportive vice-chairman and I hope to return the favour as we exchange places. David Bender as secretary is really the person who runs the show and I am very grateful to him for his unfailing ability to know the correct answer to any question, as well as his organisation of the student prize. Anne Raikes has done a fabulous job at being a very patient, forbearing and above all scrupulously competent treasurer. I am indebted also to the remaining members of the committee, Susan Bewley, Walli Bounds, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, John Illman, Les Rose, our Membership secretary Ken Bodman, and student member Kenneth Chan for their contributions in attending committee meetings, being sources of wisdom and advice, and for contributing to the newsletter. Walli Bounds and Gillian Robinson have given considerable time to producing protocols and judging the student prize.

We are all of course very grateful to Mandy Payne for her unfailing ability to pull a very high quality newsletter out of the hat, and to Caroline Addy who sees that we have not placed ourselves in legal difficulty.

The website continues to be well used, and the googlegroup which all members can join, continues to be one of the main forums for alerting each other to current issues and sharing ideas.

If I may highlight a few of the things HealthWatch has been involved in over the last year.

Supporters of Peter Wilmshurst will already be aware that the libel case against him has collapsed with the bankruptcy of NMT medical. Peter expressed his sadness that it came to this – that the many people who worked for the company lost their jobs, and that the company had been managed so

badly. Peter has been able to recoup some but not all of his costs, but he has spent years of his life devoted to defending himself, which is a cost that cannot be counted so easily. HealthWatch has supported Peter in spirit throughout and has now given Peter the £12,000 collected in the whistleblowers support fund which is a small contribution to his costs overall.

Edzard Ernst has finally been told that he will have to leave the post of professor of complimentary medicine in Exeter, though he is able to remain in post until a suitable successor has been found. Those of us familiar with Edzard's capacity to speak the truth clearly, forthrightly and prolifically, are intrigued by Edzard's view that as a result of leaving this post he will be able to speak his mind more freely in the future. Some proponents of complimentary therapies have seemed to express some degree of pleasure that Edzard will no longer hold the chair, but I suspect their joy maybe short sighted.

Les Rose has driven forward a pilot study into the Consumer Protection Scandal, and has established that the new structures for Trading Standards mean that we have had no success in our complaints about false health claims of various products. So far it is proving difficult to publish his findings, however, there is no doubt that this is a profound problem which needs further exposure.

The demise of the Prince's foundation for integrated health last year has coincided with the founding of a new 'college of medicine' which aims at promoting integrative or holistic medicine, which are ambiguous terms when the college clearly aims to promote the use of complimentary medicine amongst its goals. The college has recruited some influential names behind its cause. HealthWatch published 3 very forthright letters in the BMJ in response to a helpful article informing readers about the college. Members of the college took note and wrote a response to our letters. It is good to have our concerns published at this early stage in the development of the college as we will undoubtedly be able to refer back in the future and highlight problems that we saw at the outset.

Most recently we have also published a collaborative letter led by Susan Bewley and EdzardErnst criticizing the MHRA for trying to select proponents of homeopathy to assess whether or not homeopathic products are safe and effective. In the bruising round of rapid responses which followed homeopaths felt the need to gather the names of 40 prominent homeopaths from around the world to defend their position with what they considered to be the best evidence for homeopathy. Edzard saw this as an opportunity not to be missed and helped us produce a further combined response taking this evidence to pieces.

These more significant actions are in addition to several smaller pieces of work along the way with individuals or groups of us writing letters to supposed academics promoting CAM or organizations selling therapies without any evidence to support them.

We therefore will continue to work in any ways we can in pursuit of our aims, and continue to depend on the contributions of committee and members for which we are very grateful.

5) Membership Secretary's report (Kenneth Bodman)

Another year has gone by and the membership has remained fairly steady, currently at 134, the majority of whom pay by standing order and as I have not been notified of any cancellations I have to assume this is correct. New members are always welcome.

Two members who paid by cheque did not renew this year and could not be persuaded to commit again.

As HealthWatch will be honouring John Garrow's commitment to Healthwatch this evening it is worth pointing out that there are thankfully 22 members who joined in 1990 the same year as Nick Ross and John Garrow as well as five foundation members.

It has been a record year for student membership with 26 applications so the total student membership stands at 53. Last year 10 students graduated and David was able to persuade four of those to have the opportunity to extend their free membership for another two years.

6) Treasurer's report (Anne Raikes) attached as a .pdf file

7) Election of officers and committee members

The following nominations had been received; there being no more nominations than vacancies all were elected without a vote

Chairman: Keith Isaacson

Vice-Chairman: James May

Treasurer: Anne Raikes

Secretary: David Bender

Committee members: Susan Bewley, Walli Bounds, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, John Illman, Gillian Robinson, Les Rose, nominated by committee

Debra Bick (nominated by Susan Bewley, seconded by David Bender)

8) Any other business

Les Rose gave a brief report on the consumer protection study that he organised and is hoping to publish in a peer-reviewed journal. He commented that a number of journals had rejected the paper because of the small sample size of the study. With 134 members it is sad that so few people were willing to become involved with the study, and hoped that for future such activities more members would be willing to be active.

9) Student prize (Walli Bounds)

In the current climate of Evidence Based Medicine (EBM), healthcare professionals are encouraged to base clinical decisions on sound scientific evidence, rather than on anecdotes or personal opinions.

Are medical and nursing students sufficiently taught and so equipped to assess the quality?

In attempting to answer this question, HealthWatch has been running a 'Student Prize Competition' for the past ten years, and this report describes the 2011 competition.

Aim:

The project is designed to determine whether medical and nursing students have acquired the skills needed to critically appraise clinical trial protocols and hence assess the validity of research findings. Often claims for effectiveness or safety of healthcare treatments published in the medical and lay press and on the internet are, on closer examination, based on poorly designed clinical trials that could not possibly support the stated claims. It is vitally important that our future doctors and nurses, who will base their advice and clinical decisions on research findings, develop sound judgements of which studies can be trusted and which are obviously flawed.

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 are designed so as to 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 (in 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 assessed against the pre-assigned ranking from the judges. (Protocols of the current and previous competitions can be viewed on the HealthWatch website.)

Administration:

The competition is open to all medical and nursing students in the UK and is administered by Professor David Bender. He notifies all medical and nursing colleges early in the year, collects the entries, sends the anonymized 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.

Results:

The majority of students reported having heard about the competition via the Student BMJ, emails from their university, or via their university virtual learning environment. A total of 130 entries, including five from nurses, were received, representing the best response since the competition began ten years

ago. This is still disappointing, when compared to the total student body (there are approximately 6000 medical students in the UK). Of the 130 entries, 62 (58 from medical, and four from nursing students) had ranked the protocols in the correct order, and these were then subjected to detailed scrutiny by the judges who were unaware of the students' identities or college affiliations. As in previous years, the judges paid particular attention to see whether students identified protocol design weaknesses, such as absence of, or inappropriate control group, absence of patient/or assessor blinding, and ethical issues. The judges assessed the entries independently of each other with the aid of a 12-point check-list and then compared their results to reach agreement.

Whilst it was disappointing that fewer than half the entries ranked the protocols in the correct order, those that did, generally showed a good level of understanding of clinical trial design, and their numerous valid suggestions on how the protocols could be improved indicated that they had carefully thought about design flaws. The judges were more likely to be impressed by students who gave well-articulated sound explanations as to why they considered some protocols inferior to others, rather than merely having ticked boxes in 'clinical trial design tables' obtained via the internet and accompanied by only sparse comments which, on closer examination, suggested a lack of true understanding. There was confusion in the mind of some students as to what constitutes valid patient consent, eg in the 'obesity' protocol, some interpreted the headteachers' agreement to their schools taking part, to mean valid consent, whereas in fact the specific consent of the parents should have been obtained. Nevertheless, the judges were pleased to note that, compared to earlier years, this year's students paid more attention to ethical aspects and more often commented correctly on absence of ethics committee clearance or valid consent clauses in specific protocols. This, together with their informed comments on good protocol design, is to be welcomed and suggests that medical and nursing colleges are now paying more attention to the teaching of clinical research methodologies.

As in earlier years, the poor response from nursing students (only five entries) is most disappointing, and active steps by our HealthWatch President and committee members to generate interest among the nursing community have so far not been successful. Possible further approaches are now being explored. Interestingly, of the five nurses that took part, four (80%) had placed the protocols in the correct order, one of whom gave sufficiently well-argued reasons for her choice to merit a 'commendation'.

The prize winners were:

First Prize

Derek Ho

Imperial College Medical School

Runners up

Alastair Rankin

Glasgow Medical School

Benjamin David Williams

Peninsula Medical School

Asad Salman Mahmood

Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry

Jennifer Johnson

Warwick Medical School

Mark Loughrey

Peninsula Medical School

Nurse Commendation Award

Sara-Jane Bateman

Nottingham University School of Nursing

Derek Ho, Jennifer Johnson and Mark Loughrey were present and received their prizes from Nick Ross

Funding:

HealthWatch gratefully acknowledges the interest in, and financial support for this important competition from the Medico-Legal Society, and in earlier years from the AJAHMA Trust.

Acknowledgements:

The competition team thank Professor John Garrow for his continuing role of scientific advisor and arbiter (in case of non-agreement by the judges) and Professor David Bender and Dr. Joan Gandy (who coordinated the competition in the early years) for their much appreciated input; their contributions were crucial in getting the competition off the ground and continuing over the past ten years.

10) Award to John Garrow

David Bender noted that John Garrow was a founder member of HealthWatch and served on the committee until the 2010 AGM, consistently offering sound, evidence-based advice, which has continued with his extremely thoughtful emails on a number of topics. In recognition of this, John was presented with an over-sized steel spoon engraved with his initials and the message “evidence: one spoonful daily”.

11) HealthWatch Award to Brian Deer

Nick Ross presented the 2011 HealthWatch Award to Brian Deer for his persistence in seeking out the truth, especially with respect to the MMR scandal. Brian Deer then gave an insightful and amusing address entitled “Regrets – I’ve had a few”. The text of his address will be published in the Newsletter.

The meeting closed at 20:45, followed by a buffet supper.