

**Patrons:**  
Prof Steve Jones FRS  
Sir Michael Rawlins  
Lord Dick Taverne

# HealthWatch

for treatment that works



Registered charity no 1003392

Minutes of the 24th Annual General Meeting  
23<sup>rd</sup> October 2012  
The Medical Society of London, Chandos St, London W1

**1) Present:** Nick Ross (in the chair), Jonathan Batty (student prize winner), David Bender, Susan Bewley, Liz Blamire (student prize winner), Mr Blamire, Kenneth Bodman, Walli Bounds, Kenneth Chan, Sarah Chorley, Susan Day, Sarah Gentry (student prize winner), Tim Harford (Award winner), Alan Henness, Derek Ho, James Illman, John Illman, Jenny Isaacson, Keith Isaacson, Steve Jones, Hanadi Katerji (student prize winner), Fred Kavalier, Vincent Marks, James May, Peter May, Larry Melinek, Tom Moberly, Mandy Payne, Anne Raikes, Sir Michael Rawlins, Nick Ross, Will Townsend, Des Watson, Geoff Watts, Yvonne Yeung.

**2) Apologies for absence were received from:** Mike Baum, Debra Bick, Diana and Malcolm Brahams, John Garrow, John and Madeline McCormack, Philippa Pigache, Gillian Robinson.

**3) Minutes of the 23<sup>rd</sup> AGM (2011)** had been posted on the website; there were no matters arising.

#### **4) Chairman's report (Keith Isaacson)**

First of all I would like to thank my predecessor James May for his work as chairman and for allowing us to use his practice as a meeting place for our committees in the romantically named Lambeth Walk.

My first actions as chairman was to review our patronage and thank those who had been patrons since the inception of HealthWatch. Lord Walton wrote and reminded me that as he is now 90 he was prepared to stand down. Lord Dick Traverne is still happy to continue as a patron. Robin Ince who is well known for making mockery of alternative medicine has also kindly accepted. He is appearing at the South Bank this evening. I'm delighted that Sir Michael Rawlins Chairman of NICE and now also President of the RSM has accepted our invitation, Prof Steve Jones the well known geneticist and broadcaster has also kindly agreed to be a patron. We are delighted that they are both here this evening and have agreed to give a joint presentation to HealthWatch next March.

One of our committee members Les Rose has been very successful in carrying out a research project involving trading standards. A group of our members sent complaints about three alternative medical products to the trading standards authority -now called consumer direct. There was a pathetic response to this. Les's paper was published in the medico-legal journal and as a result he was interviewed on radio four "You and Yours" He successfully made his point. He wants to continue with a similar project on a larger scale and is looking for volunteers to help with this.

I have been actively involved in writing to various authorities throughout the year to keep the name of HealthWatch to the fore. I have not been successful in getting any letters in the national press. I had success in writing to Aberdeen University who were planning a course involving integrative medicine which was to be funded by a CAM-related organisation. I got an excellent reply from the Vice Chancellor. The course was also criticised by the Sunday press and the course was stopped .

I attended a conference at the British library for the Association of medical research charities where I made a number of useful contacts with the administrators of most of the major health charities in the UK.

The Government put out a paper on their plans for the new NHS - this was depressingly full of jargon and the electronic response was by questions that were loaded in such a way that no meaningful criticism could be made. Susan Bewley did a magnificent job in collating all our comments and sent a well constructed response.

I must thank all members of the committee who individually help towards running of the organisation. As you will hear the student prize had a large number of entries and we must thank Walli and Gillian and four new judges for their significant contribution. A new member of the committee Prof Deborah Bick who is professor of midwifery at Kings who is a useful contact with the nursing profession and provides an excellent meeting room at Kings conveniently close to Waterloo station. We have co-opted two new trainee members Larisa Corda who is in obstetrics and William Townsend who is in haematology. Together with our student members they help us with contacts within the hospital service and medical schools.

David Bender holds everything together as a very efficient secretary. Mandy Payne as our editor is outstanding. Finally I must thank our president Nick Ross who has a remarkable insight into medical matters and keeps us well-informed about media contacts. He knew the right person to bring our website up to date and I am sure you will agree is significantly improved.

## **5) Membership report (Kenneth Bodman)**

As I deal with members who renew by cheque and as I have not been informed by any member that they have cancelled their standing order payment and no newsletter has been returned to me I believe that the present membership of HealthWatch is 143, up on last year's membership of 134, and of those, 57 members now prefer the newsletter by email with the rest receiving the hard copy.

It is I suppose encouraging that in these times of cutbacks when people are finding ways to save money that the HealthWatch membership remains fairly steady.

We had one member who was not able to renew this year and sadly Dr Patrick Russell who joined in 2002 passed away last November.

At present there are 48 student members of HealthWatch and although 21 student members of HealthWatch graduated this year none regrettably have made any applications to join as full time members.

## **6) Treasurer's report: Anne Raikes**

The Balance Sheet and Statement of Financial Activities for the period 1<sup>st</sup> June 2011 to 31<sup>st</sup> May 2012 were available at the AGM and a complete copy of the Financial Statements are appended.

As in previous years, the major part of our total expenditure of £5,926 (£5,324) 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. The level of subscription income of £3,694 was down slightly from the previous year (£3,889) but together with Gift Aid still covers the cost and distribution of the Newsletter.

During the year £1,290 (£1,236) was expended on the HealthWatch Student Prize. This was funded out of funds supplied by the Medico Legal Society. There remained £1,724 in this account at end May 2012 which we believe will support the continuation of the Prize one more year. Professor John Garrow has very generously offered to support the Student prize in 2013. Thereafter, it is possible for Healthwatch to ensure the continuation of the Prize by using reserves built up over the years which now stand at £16,809.

In October 2011, the Healthwatch committee decided to distribute the small amount of £334 remaining on the Whistle Blower Support Fund to Peter Wilmshurst. This takes the total raised and paid out to Peter to £13,804.

The Accounts show a surplus this year of £707 (excluding the restricted Medico Legal Society and Whistle Blower Support Fund related activity) which is some £900 better than last year's loss of £204. The committee is delighted to have appointed Mr Lawrence Melinek as Independent Examiner, who has generously offered his services for no fee. The benefit to Healthwatch is around £500 per annum. This and the absence of legal fees are behind this year's improved results. There nevertheless

remains a need to maintain Healthwatch's 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.

Healthwatch reserves, excluding the Medico Legal Society Fund, totalled £16,809 at end May 2012, the bulk of which is held in a COIF Charities Deposit Fund.

## **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, Debra Bick, Walli Bounds, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, John Illman, Gillian Robinson, Les Rose

It was also noted that two trainee doctors, Larissa Corda and Will Townsend, and two medical journalists, James Illman and Tom Moberley had been coopted onto the committee for their special expertise. As coopted member they are not Trustees of the Charity.

## **8) Special motion (David Bender)**

***To authorise the Trustees to investigate, and if considered appropriate, to pursue, incorporation of HealthWatch as a Limited Liability Company.***

It was reported that following changes in charity law it has been suggested that this might be a sensible move, and that it would protect the Trustees, who currently have unlimited liability in the event of HealthWatch being sued. The motion was carried nem con.

## **9) HealthWatch student prize for the critical appraisal of clinical research protocols (Walli Bounds)**

The need for our future healthcare professionals to be trained in the principles and practice of evidence-based treatments remains as acute as ever, and the topic is now attracting increasing attention in the medical media. Healthcare professionals and the lay public are being inundated with publicity about new and allegedly more effective treatments. However, in order to decide whether diagnostic or therapeutic claims for a particular treatment are valid, medical and nursing/midwifery students, and those of allied professions, need to be able to assess the quality of the evidence presented in order to guide their clinical decisions. The annual HealthWatch student prize competition, which has been running for the past eleven years, aims to gain insight into how well our students are equipped for this task, and this report describes the 2012 competition.

### **Aim:**

The project is designed to determine whether medical, nursing and midwifery 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 develop the skills to properly assess clinical trials.

### **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 competitions can be viewed on the HealthWatch website.)

#### **Administration:**

The competition is open to all medical and nursing/midwifery 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 and Professor Debra Bick personally contact staff at selected medical and nursing 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 emails from their university, or via their university intranet/virtual learning environment. A total of 135 entries, including 21 from nurses/midwives, were received, representing the best response since the competition began eleven years ago. Though still disappointing, when compared to the total student body (there are approximately 6000 medical students in the UK), it is an encouraging trend and suggests greater awareness among students of the need for research scrutiny. Of the 114 entries from medical students, 88 (77%) had ranked the protocols in the correct order, while the corresponding figure for nurses/midwives is 13 (62%) out of 21. Thus, a total of 101 correctly-ranked entries (comprising 404 protocol-sections) were then subjected to detailed scrutiny by six 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 six judges assessed the entries independently of each other with the aid of an 11-point check-list and then compared their results to reach agreement.

Apart from an overall increase in the number of entries received, it was encouraging to note that, in both categories of students, a much higher proportion (77% of medical- and 62% of nursing/midwifery students) had ranked the protocols in the correct order, compared with less than 50% in the 2011 competition. Nevertheless, on scrutinizing students' narrative given in support of their choice of ranking, it became obvious that many still have only a limited grasp of essential protocol design elements, as evidenced by approximately half the entries having been awarded only 22 or fewer points (of the maximum possible 44) on the 11-point check list.

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.

Credit is due to the short-listed top-ten entries from which the winners and runners-up were selected. They generally showed a good level of understanding, presented a well-argued rationale for their choice of ranking, and their numerous valid suggestions on how the protocols could be improved indicated that they had carefully thought about design flaws.

Unlike in previous years, the present competition not only attracted a much better response from nurses/midwives, but their entries were also of a high standard, as demonstrated by 62% having ranked the protocols in the correct order. This is to be welcomed. Nurses/midwives too need to understand the principles of good trial design, as they are frequently the first point of call when patients seek advice about whether to trust (sometimes exaggerated) media reports about 'the new wonder drug'.

#### **The prize winners were:**

##### Medical Students:

##### First Prize

Jonathan Batty

Leeds University

##### Runners-up

Michael Beard

University of East Anglia

Benjamin Smeeton

Peninsula Medical School

Sharif Ismael  
Chris Wheeler  
Sarah Gentry

Imperial College London  
Manchester University  
Peninsula Medical School

Nursing and Midwifery Students

First Prize

Elizabeth Blamire

Anglia Ruskin University

Runners-up

Adam Peel

University of East Anglia

Hanadi Katerji

City University

Georgia Poole

Southampton University

**Funding:**

HealthWatch gratefully acknowledges the interest in, and financial support for, this important competition from the Medico-Legal Society (MLS), and in earlier years from the AJAHMA Trust. The MLS funding is now exhausted, but Professor John Garrow has generously offered to fund the 2013 competition, for which we are most grateful.

**Acknowledgements:**

The HealthWatch committee thank all those involved in the organisation and scientific input/assessments of this year's competition, specifically: David Bender, Debra Bick, Walli Bounds, Roger Fiskin, Sally Gordon Boyd, William Lee, Anil Patel, and Gillian Robinson. Without their dedication and generously given support, this important competition would not have been possible.

Following the report Nick Ross presented the prizes to those students who were able to attend: Jonathan Batty, Sarah Gentry, Elizabeth Blamire, and Hanadi Katerji.

**10) HealthWatch Award 2012**

Nick Ross presented the 2012 HealthWatch Award to Tim Harford on behalf of the BBC More or Less team for their clear, honest and entertaining way of educating the public about the meaning of numbers, and Tim Harford gave an entertaining and educational address. A report of this address will appear in the Newsletter and on the website.

The meeting closed at 20:30, followed by a buffet supper.