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HealthWatch

for science and integrity in medicine



Registered charity no 1003392

Minutes of the 28th Annual General Meeting, October 20th 2016

- 1) **Present:** David Bender, Susan Bewley, Debra Bick, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, Walli Bounds, Iain Chalmres, Guy Chapman, David Colquhoun, Rupert Fawdry, Roger Fiskin, Andrew Fulton, Joan Gandy, Sally Gordon-Boyd, Sofia Hart, Alan Henness, Frank Hytten, Keith Isaacson, John Kirwan, Richard Lansdowne, James May, Peter May, Tom Moberly, Mandy Payne, Philippa Pigache, Anne Raikes, Les Rose, Nick Ross.
- 2) **Apologies for absence:** Mike Baum, Neville Goodman, Caroline Richmond, Lord Dick Taverne, Heinz Woff.
- 3) **Minutes of the 27th AGM** had been posted on the website and were approved. There were no matters arising.
- 4) **Chairman's report (James May)**

The activities of HealthWatch and of our friends have seen significant progress in a number of important areas, whilst the challenges in other areas seem to be growing all the bigger.

I am personally very grateful to the committee for their commitment to the cause throughout the year. I would like to thank Debra Bick as Vice Chair, David Bender as Secretary, Anne Raikes our Treasurer, and to those who compose the rest of the committee, Susan Bewley, who is stepping down after many years of service and activity, Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, Andrew Fulton, Sofia Hart, Alan Henness, John Illman, Keith Isaacson, John Kirwan, Tom Moberley, and Les Rose.

As ever we are all deeply grateful to Mandy Payne for editing the Newsletter each quarter, and to Caroline Addy for checking it for libel.

Our website is being updated to make it easier to use, and to enable joining online.

The members googlegroup continues to be a place where a lot of HealthWatch activity takes place, and I would encourage you to join. It is a great way of sharing information quickly, and getting answers to questions and plotting responses to news items or consultations.

Homeopathy has been having a difficult year with their now only being two areas in the England – Bristol and London where is available on the NHS. Alan Henness of our committee and our friends the Nightingale Collaboration have put sustained pressure on the Advertising Standards Authority to ensure that homeopaths are aware by means of a letter sent to all homeopaths, informing them of the marketing regulations governing their advertising and websites.

In March an article in the Sunday Times reported Les Rose arguing that homeopath charities fail the public benefit test of the Charities Commission. The NHS still spends between 3 and 5 million pounds on homeopathy so there is still work to be done.

Acupuncture is also on the back foot as evidence increasingly seems to show that it is ineffective in the treatment of anything. Our Australian colleagues 'Friends of Science in Medicine' have written a detailed report on the current state of acupuncture.

To compound the problems facing alternative therapies, David Colquhoun has written a detailed blog summarising research showing that placebo effects are actually far more limited than we have perhaps been led to believe and are largely explained by regression to the mean. That is to say that people tend to seek help for their illnesses when they are particularly bad, and it is no surprise that they frequently improve after this point.

Last year's debate on the Saatchi Bill and the 'Stop the Saatchi Bill campaign' has been rewarded by an amended bill being passed which was entirely stripped of any of the concerning legislation regarding the use of experimental treatments and leaving only a hypothetical register which was already allowed for without having to legislate.

This year our debate was on the Sugar Tax and produced a wide ranging and stimulating discussion on the nature of the evidence of the harms of sugar, the ethics of a tax which might disproportionately affect the poor, and the politics and practicalities of such a policy. The audience vote slightly favoured supporting the tax. It was a useful exercise to explore the complexities of what it means to use evidence based medicine as the basis for policy changes.

David Colquhoun has continued to use his blog DC Science to critique the so called College of Medicine whose origins lay in the financially dubious Prince of Wales Foundation for Integrated Health. He criticises their conference entitled, 'Food the Forgotten Medicine' for being a bait and switch where they insist on dressing up their alternative treatments to have an orthodox façade. He also questions why some highly respected clinicians seem to support the College despite the clear departure from Evidence Based Medicine.

Les Rose has persevered with a challenging study into the efficacy of consumer protection and is currently processing the data which clearly shows how difficult it is to persuade trading standards to act against products being sold with bogus health claims.

At least two members have received awards in the last year.

Susan Bewley received a BMJ award for her persistence and courage in 'speaking truth to power' and David Colquhoun received the Wellcome Gold Medal for sustained research achievements in pharmacology.

We have been reviewing our vision and activities, notably this afternoon in a highly productive period in which we have discussed how we should move forward with the challenges and opportunities we now face. One of the significant challenges we have become aware of is the problem of communicating to likeminded people, and so we have particularly reflected on how we persuade those who we disagree with. Watch this space.

5) Membership report (David Bender)

Membership remains steady at 148. We lost three members during the year (the deaths of two founder members, Andrew Herxheimer and John Garrow,) and resignation of one member due to changed circumstances. Three new members have joined during the year. There are 33 student members. None of the students qualifying this year took up the offer of an additional two years complimentary membership, and none of those completing their additional two years complimentary membership took up full membership.

A new on-line membership application and management system is in development through the newly redesigned website, which will permit automatic reminders for renewal and payment by PayPal or credit card.

6) Treasurer's report (Anne Raikes)

As in previous years, the major part of our total expenditure of £6,251 (£5,654) is incurred in producing and distributing the Newsletter (four each year). This year's higher expenditure includes the impact of highly successful debate in March 2015.

Members of the Committee continue to give their time and effort at no cost to HealthWatch. The level of subscription income of £3,854 was up slightly from the previous year (£3,618) which, together with Gift Aid, covers the cost and distribution of the Newsletter.

During the year £2,431 (£1,735) was expended on the HealthWatch Student Prize. This was funded from the donation from Katy Christomanou (Senior Journals Editor, STEM) of

Cambridge University Press. After a second generous donation this year from Katy, there is now £3,737 in this fund for the coming years.

The Accounts show a small loss this year of £142 (excluding the restricted Healthwatch Student Prize fund) compared with last year's profit of £476. The difference is predominately that this year includes the cost of the debate. There 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 Research Fund amounted to £49,388 at 31 May 2015. This is made up of the original donation of £50,000 plus some bank interest less initial legal fees on a research project headed by Les Rose.

Healthwatch reserves, excluding the Student Prize Fund and the Healthwatch Research Fund, totalled £16,835 at end May 2015, down £142 from last year, the bulk of which is held in a COIF Charities Deposit Fund.

Lawrence Melinek was re-appointed as Independent Examiner

7) Election of officers and Trustees:

Chairman: James May
Vice Chairman: Debra Bick,
Treasurer: Anne Raikes
Secretary: David Bender

Trustees: Diana Brahams, Malcolm Brahams, Alan Henness, Keith Isaacson, Jophn Illman, John Kirwan, Tom Moberley, Philippa Pigache, Les Rose.

There being no other nominations, all were declared duly elected.

8) Student prize competition for critical evaluation of clinical research protocols (Walli Bounds)

How well are our future healthcare professionals trained to distinguish between good-quality research that can be trusted, and poorly designed studies that cannot possibly support their stated claims? To gain some insight into the quality of training, HealthWatch set-up the annual Student Prize Competition back in 2002, and thanks to funding from the Ajahma Trust, the Medico-Legal Society, from Professor Garrow, and in recent years from Cambridge University Press, we have been able to run the competition for 15 consecutive years. This brief report relates to the 2016 competition.

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 to contain varying degrees of scientific, methodological and ethical flaws, 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 in the 2016 competition comprised the following:

Lotion for spot reduction of subcutaneous fat
Moxibustion for breech presentation
Calf's foot jelly for osteoarthritis
Castor oil to treat baldness

Administration: The competition is open to all medical, dental, nursing and midwifery students, and students of professions allied to medicine in the UK and is administered by Professor David Bender. He notifies all training colleges early in the year, collects the entries, sends the anonymized entries (from those who assigned the protocols in the correct order) to the judges for detailed appraisal, and notifies all participants of the results. Students are grouped into one of the following two categories, with each category offering £500 for the winner and £100 for each of up to five runners-up: Medicine and Dentistry and Nursing, Midwifery and Professions Allied to Medicine (PAM).

Results: All entries were judged 'blind'. To qualify for a prize, students had to achieve a minimum of 70% of the maximum possible score, based on students correctly commenting on the presence or absence of key protocol design features.

This year's results were most disappointing in that only 67 entries were received, of which a mere 8 (12%) had placed the protocols in the correct order. All 8 correct entries came from students of Medicine and Dentistry, but sadly none from Nursing/Midwifery students or from students of professions Allied to Medicine.

Despite the 4 protocols having been deliberately designed in a manner that showed a clear distinction in the quality of the study-designs, it is of concern that so few entrants succeeded in ranking them correctly. Moreover, even among those who did so, only 4 (50%) achieved the minimum number of points required to qualify for a prize. As in earlier years, many failed to notice the lack of informed patient consent or ethics committee clearance in some of the protocols, or the absence of key features, such as control group, patient or investigator blinding, or clearly defined outcome measures, to name but a few. These disappointing results point to the need for much better education of healthcare professionals about evidence-based treatments, including how to critically appraise research findings and spot weaknesses in their protocol designs, if we are to protect the public from ineffective or possibly harmful treatments.

To the winner and runners-up, we extend our admiration and heartfelt congratulations and wish them well in their careers. They are:

Winner:

Emma Mills – Medical Student, Aberdeen

Runners-up:

Dylan Rakhra – Dental Student, Bristol

Yuan Ye Beh – Medical Student, Aberdeen

Mitchell Burden – Medical Student, Sheffield

Their prizes were awarded by President Nick Ross

Funding/Acknowledgements:

Our thanks go to Cambridge University Press for having sponsored the 2016 competition and to David Bender, Walli Bounds, and John Kirwan for their administrative and scientific contributions.

- 9) **The 2016 HealthWatch Award** was presented to Peter Gøtzsche, who gave an address on the subject of "Is it controversial to tell the truth about health care?"