Commonwealth Fund Aids Doctors in Rural Practice

Experimental Course in Psychiatry Brings Better Understanding of Patients

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Quietly and without the public attention that characterizes therapeutic endeavors, The Commonwealth Fund, founded in 1811 by Mrs. Stephen V. Harkness "to do something for the ill and the kind," recently issued its twentieth annual report. A professional dignity and clarity of thought and purpose is characteristic of the Fund's activities, for few of those who beheld its birth in 1913 can now imagine the program of medical research, medical education, rural hospital service and activities for mental health that are even aware that such an organization existed. The Fund has no index to its program, however, no index to the scope and effectiveness of the fund program that embraced a budget of more than $2,000,000 last year to promote medical progress.

It is not surprising that two of the projects were recently accorded national attention from the fund last year, mental health and rural health services, also received increased recognition as national needs by both the public and the profession. The first of these Commonwealth projects was an experimental course in psychiatry in the University of Minnesota for a selected group of general medical practitioners. With the awakened public interest in psychiatry and the acute shortage of trained psychiatrists, this course and the reaction of the doctors participating were significant and heartening.

The practical seminar dealt with personality, its development and disorders, the problems of anxiety, the basis of complaint, the "chronic complainer," the forces inherent in the relationship between physician and patient, the interplay of the emotions and physical illness, and the electrolyte and psychotherapy.

Six months after completion of the course and return to practice, a postparticipation reporting that the principles they had been taught "of real and practical benefit in dealing with patients."

One doctor, for example, cited the improvement in a case of eczema of ten years' standing in a miner who thought himself a failure. Another told of having reversed the course of an illness by relieving the burden of guilt from a girl who, because of her inability to take food, was in danger of death.

Comment in Report

The report comments: "Most of the men—this is perhaps the heart of the matter—were happy in practice. They had gained a feeling of trust in their own ability, a feeling that they could help the patients they were treating. This increment of freedom in the relationship with the patients was no small factor in helping them to become better doctors. Perhaps this is the irrevocable effect of quality of psychiatry has to teach medical men. If, so, it is still a precious gain."

A similar experimental program was undertaken by the Commonwealth Fund in a number of other instances dealing with mental health, the success of this course is of special importance in view of the passage in 1946 of the National Mental Health Act. This act set aside grants for the development of a national mental health program by creating the National Institute of Mental Health for research and training in the causes and treatment of mental and nervous diseases, and by providing grants-in-aid for research, training and State mental health projects.

Altho no funds have been appropriated yet to carry out the program, the projects have been set for consideration of the states in 1947. However, it will be some time before the projects of this federally-supervised program will filter down the administrative structure to the point of being usable. The training project, for which the Commonwealth Fund is sponsor, has demonstrated a method for making dynamic progress concerned with the care of psychoneurotics and the relief of emotional strain available to the general practitioner.

Regional Hospital Council

Of equal significance and importance are the experimental projects carried out by the Commonwealth Fund in a cooperative plan of regional hospitalization. The report points out that the "well-meaning and well-intentioned general physician may have much to teach the teacher of medicine who is dealing with the underprivileged and sheltered environment of the medical center."

It was upon this premise that the Fund organized a Council of Regional Hospitals near Rockford, Ill., N. Y., with seventeen hospital members, eleven of whom are members of the council, the members being from small hospitals that have begun clinical teaching conferences, to which a large patient specialist from the University of Rochester School of Medicine is brought in once a month for a day of teaching rounds and case discussion. Interests from the large Rochester General Hospital are rotating at the same time through the smaller Geneva General Hospital. A regional bulletin is issued regularly. To this end has been the inclusion of physicians throughout the area in clinical conferences at the larger hospitals.

Courses from smaller hospitals are receiving additional training in the larger teaching centers. Specialists also are attending the conferences with hospitals with administrative and professional problems. A major administrative and financial problem to the report, is to define the relationships between hospital boards and medical staffs in such a way that both may work constructively for the provision of better patient care.

Experiment in Virginia

A similar regional experiment, on a much smaller scale, was started last year by the fund in eastern and southeastern Virginia with the Medical College of Virginia at Richmond as the central nucleus. This of the group activities similar to those conducted in the Virginia area, this program was brought down to the same level of isolation that retards the growth of the small hospital. Commonwealth also means the emergence of the medical school in a new role in its professional control over the institutions to its immediate environment is also encouraged.

These and other activities of the Commonwealth Fund to promote rural hospitals in effect, and other-hospital relationships should be the basis of the administrative and professional effort of the future. The need for rural hospitals to be built as a result of the Hill-Burton Act passed by the 1946 Congress is obvious.

The law provides for the expendi-