

LEADERSHIP AND MEDICAL TRIBALISM

The recent Royal College of Physicians (RCP) report examining professionalism, identified leadership as an essential prerequisite for our profession in the new millennium. Leadership was also featured in the latest *RACP News* (magazine of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians), which highlighted leaders among the College's Fellows: a state governor, two vice-chancellors of leading universities, 10 deans of medical schools, and the last three chief medical officers of the Australian Government. This is an impressive line-up, but is reaching the pinnacles of the establishment, academia or the bureaucracy synonymous with leadership?

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a leader as “n. **1 a.** a person or thing that leads. **b.** a person followed by others.” But, as noted by a US academic, there is another dimension: “... leadership must be intimately connected to the process of change. The leader expresses not what the group is but what it might be.”

And yet, doctors are not followers, and are wary of change. New medical bodies appear regularly, as John Green, former chief executive of the Royal Society of Medicine and observer of doctors, opines: “There is no kingdom too small for a doctor to be king of.” Medical tribalism appears to be endemic, and is not without its consequences.

Sir Donald Irvine, past president of the United Kingdom General Medical Council, notes: “Tribalism has a profound impact on the profession — we are a dysfunctional profession at that level right through the system, and it is hurting us.” In fact, Dame Janet Smith, Chairman of the Shipman Inquiry, echoes such sentiments: “Tribalism causes doctors as a group to protect themselves, rather than acting collectively.”

The RCP report strongly recommends a “common forum” that speaks “with a unified voice”. With more than 30 medical tribes making up Australian medicine, is this imperative possible?



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LETTERS

- Decline in meningitis admissions in young children: vaccines make a difference**
404 Hannah C Moore, Deborah Lehmann
- Increase in caesarean section rates among low-risk women in Queensland, 1990–2004**
404 Trisha C Johnston, Michael D Coory
- Nephrotic-range proteinuria in the obese patient**
405 Andy K H Lim
- Do advance care directives improve acute care services for older people?**
406 Andrew W Holt, Alnis E Vedig
- Barriers to student access to patients in a group of teaching hospitals**
406 Sarah J Abrahamson
- Birth centre trials are unreliable**
407 Kathleen M Fahy, Sally Tracy
407 Andrew F Pesce
- Research is needed before GPs can engage in “positive” family planning**
408 Angela M Cooney

BOOK REVIEWS

- 376 **SARS. How a global epidemic was stopped**
Reviewed by Peter A Cameron
- 386 **Manual of travel medicine: a pre-travel guide for health care practitioners**
Reviewed by Nicholas A Zwar
- 386 **Tolkien II — a needs-based, costed stepped-care model for mental health services**
Reviewed by Stephen J Duckett
- 387 **New thinking about mental health and employment**
Reviewed by Nicholas A Keks

CORRECTIONS

- 400 **2. Anaphylaxis: diagnosis and management** (*Med J Aust* 2006; 185: 283-289)
- 408 **The burden of chronic kidney disease in Australian patients with type 2 diabetes (the NEFRON study)** (*Med J Aust* 2006; 185: 140-144)
- 408 **Potential for organ donation in Victoria: an audit of hospital deaths** (*Med J Aust* 2006; 185: 250-254)

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- 346 **IN THIS ISSUE**
380 **BOOKS RECEIVED**
402 **IN OTHER JOURNALS**
-

Cover image Emergency Department Darwin Hospital after the Bali bombing, October 14 2002. Courtesy Peter Farkas