

PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIFTY-SECOND ANNUAL MEETING OF
THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR CLINICAL INVESTIGATION
HELD IN ATLANTIC CITY, N. J., MAY 2, 1960

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIETY, 1960

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It is one of the ancient and, to the victim, barbaric customs of this rite of spring for the president to address the members of the Society on some aspect of the current scene in clinical investigation. The message is then recorded in the *Journal of the Society* where it is available for posterity, or rather for later presidents in search of suitable quotations pertinent to their own addresses. I had thought that the subjects I plan to discuss were of only immediate interest and too topical to have any significance beyond the next year or so. However, a reading of the recently compiled history of the Society indicates that these same subjects have been the center of discussion almost since the Society was organized. These two matters—the form of the meeting and the criteria for the election of new members—again demand the attention of the membership. The considerations that influence our attitudes on these questions today may differ from those which have been debated in the past and from those which will determine the position of the Society in the future. Nevertheless, we must make decisions based on the current situation, recognizing that they will require continuous reconsideration and possible revision in the future.

Since action on each of these matters is, at this time, required of the Council and the membership, it seems appropriate that the presidential address be devoted to an attempt to clarify the issues involved. The time available for the transaction of business at our annual meeting is sufficiently limited to preclude much adherence to the forms of democratic procedure. Nevertheless, the officers of the Society act in the conviction that they understand and represent the will of the majority of the members and, although the formal opportunities for the members to make known their wishes are few, the informal occasions are many. It is in this spirit that I place before the Society my personal convictions on the problems requiring decision.

As you may know, three years ago the president appointed a committee of the Council to meet with representatives of the Federation for Clinical Research to arrange for the conduct of section meetings on various subspecialties of clinical investigation. The committee was instructed to plan the meetings, in cooperation with the Federation if possible but separately if necessary, and to arrange that the section meetings should not conflict with the general scientific program of the Society on Monday. Agreement was reached, and jointly sponsored meetings were set up for Sunday afternoon and,

in some subspecialties, Sunday evening. In order to make this possible, the Federation gave up its Sunday afternoon general meeting. It was also agreed that following a reasonable trial of this arrangement there would be a review to determine whether changes were indicated. A possible expansion of the section meetings was to be subject to such a review. It was conceded, without commitment, that the Society might entertain the possibility that such expansion would replace part of its Monday general scientific session. The time for such a review is at hand and I feel it appropriate to indicate to the members of the Society the possible factors upon which our decision should be based.

I believe it safe to say that the section meetings have been highly successful. They have permitted the presentation of a considerable number of papers which, because of the limitations of time, could not have been included in the general programs of the two societies. More important, they have permitted the inclusion of a number of excellent papers which, because they deal with technical matters of a highly specialized nature, would be inappropriate for a general audience, but are received with interest and insight by workers in the same field. Discussion is far less inhibited by the smaller audience and the much less overwhelming size of the meeting halls and is encouraged by the greater community of interest and understanding.

As to the increase in the number of papers presented, those submitted to the Society have fared somewhat better both absolutely and relatively than those submitted to the Federation. The section meetings have permitted the presentation of more than twice as many of the papers submitted to the Society: just under one of every three papers offered finds a place on one or another program. Because of the sacrifice of part of its general session, there is a smaller increase in the number of papers accepted for the Federation program. In addition, because of a continuing rapid increase in the number of abstracts submitted to the Federation, only one in every six or seven is actually presented.

It is always difficult to evaluate, from an abstract, the work which it represents, but it is my feeling and the considered opinion of the chairmen of the various section meetings, both this year and last, that, except for two of the sections, the programs could not be appreciably expanded without reducing their present high level. Since three of the sections now meet only in the afternoon, additional programs could be fitted into the even-

ings by further subdivision of the more prolific special areas, but it must be conceded that the evening sessions are considerably less satisfactory than those in the afternoon.

This, then, is the background upon which a decision concerning the future of the section programs must be based. I, personally, am opposed to their expansion. There is today, as there was when Dr. Meltzer delivered the first presidential address to the Society, cause for concern about the science of clinical medicine. The basis for this concern is, however, entirely different. The establishment of the science of clinical medicine as a branch distinct from its practice has long since been accomplished. Today we find clinical investigation grown so massive that it has become subdivided into many smaller branches, each of which has tended to fuse back with the corresponding basic science, thus leading not only to a widening separation between the science and practice of medicine, but also to an increasing individualization of the specialized investigative areas. The growing complexity of technology as well as the snowballing accretion of information in each field makes it virtually impossible for an individual to be expert in more than one. Nevertheless, few of us can afford ignorance in fields outside our own, and a single day's exposure to a reasonable sampling of the better work in clinical investigation is all too inadequate.

That only a minority of papers submitted finds a place on the program is, perhaps, unfortunate, but so long as this fact does not discourage submission of excellent material for the program it should not be an important consideration. There is, these days, no lack of opportunity for communication. The ease and speed of travel and the availability of funds to support it has led to such a massive proliferation of meetings, conferences and symposia that one wonders when the participants will find the time to get any new work done. It is, perhaps, a self-limiting disorder since those most involved must eventually run out of things to talk about. In any case, we need not feel that limitations on the size of our programs significantly diminish the service to our members and guests. I believe our aims are best served by continuing to hold a program of the highest quality and limited size and continuing to provide the opportunity for less formal communication, both technical and otherwise, which traditionally goes on outside this hall.

The other problem that the Society must face is one for which the solution is less apparent and which will not be adequately handled by simple maintenance of the *status quo*. That problem concerns the election of new members. The problem has been very clearly outlined by Dr. Dole and his associates in the material circulated in support of the constitutional amendment which they have proposed. The amendment would eliminate from consideration all candidates for election to the Society who have reached the age of 40. If the amendment alone or in combination with a moderate increase in the rate of election of new members would restore the balance between candidates proposed and those elected, it would be a welcome forward step. However, I do not

believe that it would adequately meet this problem. It is true that there would be a sharp decrease in the candidates for election next year if all those over 40 were dropped from consideration and their elimination from consideration were on such an arbitrary basis that it could not be considered a reflection on them personally. Of the 193 candidates for election this year, 86 would not be eligible for consideration next year solely on the basis of age. An additional 34 candidates from the group nominated in 1958 would either have been elected or dropped from consideration, bringing the total number carried over from this year to something under 73 and most likely around 50. If we could then anticipate next year a number of new proposals not greater than the average of recent years, the list to be considered would be at its lowest level in the last ten years. However, I doubt that this situation could last very long. An extraordinarily large number of candidates was proposed in 1958—so many, in fact, that even after reduction of the list by two previous elections there were still more candidates up for election this year from those nominated in 1958 than the totals proposed in either 1959 or 1960. Furthermore, of the candidates proposed this year the unusually large number of 26, or 39 per cent, would not be eligible next year under the proposed amendment, 18 of these 26 being already past the age of 40. Thus the number who would be dropped this year is unusually large in several respects. It seems clear that the membership, anticipating possible adoption of the amendment, has proposed the names of a large number of candidates for whom it might be the last chance. It seems virtually certain, however, that in the future, in view of the limited period of eligibility, candidates will be proposed in equal numbers but at an earlier age, when it may be even more difficult to evaluate their independent contributions.

In seeking a satisfactory policy for the election of new members, it is essential that we have a clear idea of what we wish to accomplish by that policy. In other words, what is to be the significance of membership in the Society? It seems to me that election to membership represents primarily recognition of the accomplishment of significant original and independent research in clinical and related fields. It seems, furthermore, that election to membership is, more or less, an end in itself. The rights and privileges which pertain to membership are otherwise relatively trivial. A regrettably small minority is privileged to hold office or serve on the committees of the Society and thus to play an active role in the conduct of its business. While only members, active or emeritus, may introduce papers at the meetings, it is unusual for any investigator with worthy material to be unable to find a sponsor. As for the sponsorship of candidates for membership, the problem is only too clear. I therefore find it difficult to believe that most candidates over the age of 40 have failed of election only because the Councils have preferred persons who could participate as active members for five or more years.

If election is to be considered recognition of accomplishment in research, however, it behooves us to make certain that those elected are those whose accomplish-

ments best warrant the distinction. If we can have complete confidence that this is the case, we can live with any arbitrary limitation of the number elected and not feel that any injustice has been done those rejected, although we should certainly adjust the arbitrary limitation to the number of really highly qualified candidates. The question we then must ask ourselves is whether our evaluation of candidates is adequate to provide complete confidence that those most qualified have been elected. I must frankly admit that I do not feel that our present system uniformly warrants such confidence. Let me hasten to say that I believe the Council makes every effort to base its decisions solely upon the significance, originality and independence of an individual's contributions. But the ability of the Council to evaluate these on the basis of the information available to it is limited. The high degree of specialization of which we spoke earlier makes it unlikely that any Council member will be familiar with the details of the work of many candidates outside of his own field of interest. The short time available and the large number of candidates to be considered make it difficult for most Council members to read more than a small selection of the papers of many of the candidates. Consequently they must rely largely upon the letters of the nominators, which rarely are restrained in their support of the candidates, upon an attempt to evaluate the bibliographies from the titles of the papers and the reputation of the journals in which they appear, upon the advice of colleagues who may be familiar with the work of some of the candidates, and upon the letters received from members. The latter are not too helpful, since they so rarely offer a comparative evaluation of various candidates and so often represent

a good word for a nominee solicited by his sponsors. I have painted the worst side of the picture. Despite the limitations, I believe the Council makes the best of a very difficult situation and, by and large, recommends for election each year those best qualified for membership. However, I feel that the process could be considerably improved, the burden on the Council somewhat relieved, and confidence in the adequacy of the selection process strengthened. This end might be served by the appointment of a qualifications committee, composed of several representatives of each of the various specialized areas of investigation. Such a group might review the work of each candidate in sufficient detail to be able to provide to the Council an evaluation based upon a familiarity both with the field and the standing of the candidate within it. The final selection of those to be recommended to the Society for election would remain the responsibility of the Council, which would not necessarily be bound by the recommendations of the committee and would be expected to maintain a reasonable balance among the various fields of investigation. The number of individuals recommended by the committee as highly qualified might also be of value in providing to the Council some guide as to the desirable annual rate of election. Whether or not such a procedure is adopted I feel that it is essential that the nomination date be advanced so as to provide, to those who are to evaluate the candidate, sufficient time to familiarize themselves more thoroughly with his work. With some such assurance of the adequacy of our selection process and with a clear understanding among the proposers of new members of the criteria for election, we need have little concern about the number or age of the candidates for election.