

that Council had seen my letters and that 'as supreme governing body, the College Council has the full management and control of the College and of its affairs'. The matter was closed when Dr Birley, the next President, wrote that 'the procedure concerning the Council's resolution was that followed by our Council in the conduct of its affairs. It does not require a plebiscite of its members. The resolution may not be so draconian as you feared'. So Dr Birley justified Council procedure, its disposing of a major policy decision at an ordinary business meeting attended by 80 members, and confirms that Council had imposed 'draconian' restrictions on South Africa without publishing a reason. Surely this is a confession of the abuse of psychiatry, and of the authority of a president, for political motives?

The resolution was put into effect when Professor Simpson, a South African member, was banned from giving his paper on 'AIDS in Africa' at the Autumn Quarterly Meeting. Dr Birley told the press that members had threatened violence otherwise, and that the decision was 'political'.<sup>4</sup> Who were these members? What action has been taken against them? However, a proposal for the British Psychological Society to follow the College resolution was ruled ultra vires the Royal Charter<sup>5</sup> by their Honorary General Secretary. I am a British subject, now resident and working in South Africa. I do not have the right to vote. I condemn utterly the resolution of the College, of which I am a Foundation Fellow, intended to hinder my work and teaching. The position of Fellows in South Africa in relation to other doctors and the Government may now be invidious because of the policy of the College.

For this reason I published a factual account of the affair in the *South African Medical Journal*.<sup>6</sup> As it may not be seen by members, I am now informing them in the *Bulletin*. The resolution is obviously ultra vires and its content incorrect. It should be rescinded. But the motivation for the resolution raises very serious questions. Although it is unethical, Council has said it had been approved by the British and Commonwealth Governments. Members are permitted to have professional relationships with South Africans, *only* if they serve Council's political aims. The resolution was passed without the consent or even the knowledge of 98% of Members.

There can be no confidence in the administration of the College until this irregular and confusing affair has been fully cleared up.

R. E. HEMPHILL

*Groote Schuur Hospital,  
Cape Town, South Africa*

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>COUNCIL RESOLUTION ON APARTHEID (1987) *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, 11, 246.
- <sup>2</sup>ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS (1987) Quarterly Business Meeting, 28 January 1987 (no. 4)
- <sup>3</sup>BEWLEY, T. (1987) Appeal for Research Unit (Letter inserted in June 1987 issue). *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, 11.

<sup>4</sup>THOMPSON, G. (1987) Stiffing a cry for freedom. *The Argus*, 9 November 1987.

<sup>5</sup>THE EDITOR'S NOTE (1987) *The Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, 40, 379.

<sup>6</sup>HEMPHILL, R. E. (1987) The Royal College of Psychiatrists and medical sanctions against South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, 72, 659-660.

#### *Dr Birley replies*

To take Dr Hemphill's points in order:

- (1) The adoption of the resolution was announced in the *Bulletin* in March 1987 and guidelines were published in the July 1987 edition. The correct procedures were followed and no secrecy was involved.
- (2) The text of the resolution is that published by the Commonwealth Secretariat in the book *Mission to South Africa* (1986). This followed the visit of 'eminent persons' to South Africa. Lord Barber was the British representative. The Prime Minister referred, with approval, to the Nassau Accord on her recent visit to Kenya and Nigeria.
- (3) Our action is not ultra vires. The College has commented on other situations, notably concerning the abuse of psychiatry in Russia. We were also accused then, by the Russians, of political interference.
- (4) Dr Hemphill refers to 'a boycott'. Council guidelines indicate clearly that no boycott is intended. I have already written in the *Bulletin* (February 1988 and below) and elsewhere concerning the matter of Professor Simpson. No members had ever threatened violence on this matter, nor did I ever say they had done so.

DR J. L. T. BIRLEY  
*President*

#### *Professor Simpson writes*

DEAR SIRS

I am writing to place on record an episode of disgraceful behaviour on the part of the College in October 1987. Having been denied academic freedom in this country, I did not expect a more stringent denial of my professional rights by my own College, in Britain.

Let me summarise what happened. I was invited, as the College's guest, to speak at the Autumn meeting, in a symposium on AIDS. I later submitted a short paper on a vitally important and sensitive psychiatric topic, which was accepted for presentation at the meeting. I have been a distinguished academic psychiatrist in Britain, Canada and America; a member of the College for some 15 years, a previous Examiner for the College.

After I came to South Africa, to this area of such great need, I suffered great persecution and personal harassment because of my opposition to apartheid, my work with black students and community groups, and my work in establishing that harsh political detentions without trial caused psychiatric damage, amongst other work. I was eventually forced out of my senior academic post by continuous harassment, including death threats.

In both of my invited addresses to the College meeting

I hoped to discuss some of the experiences of myself, colleagues and patients, as we are presently unable to do in this country, to gain the understanding and advice of our colleagues in Britain, and to present new information of potentially significant value in other countries.

When I arrived in Britain for the meeting, I received a very curiously worded letter from the President, telling me that my two papers had been withdrawn from the programme, and I was not to talk at the College meeting.

No proper explanation of this extraordinary and unethical behaviour has ever been given to me. Reference was made to a recent College resolution: yet that resolution specifically and expressly insisted that NO academic boycott should occur, and that Members and speakers from South Africa should NOT be barred from speaking at College meetings. Though that resolution was properly passed by the formal processes of the College after due discussion, and should be binding on the President and officers of the College, they acted in direct contravention of its meaning and intent.

This was, I believe, the first time that a British Royal College has excluded one of its senior members from participation in a meeting, for base political reasons. It is unethical and improper action, even in breach of basic Hippocratic rather than hippocritic principles.

No public announcement was ever made about this cowardly act, and members were never told what their President and College had done. People were widely puzzled about why I never appeared at the podium to speak; and my professional and academic reputation (as a significant speaker, who has never yet failed to attend and speak when expected) was damaged.

My feelings were ignored. Apart from shifty, muttered, embarrassed, brief comments by some of those responsible for what happened, I never received a proper apology or the chance to discuss the situation.

Since my return, I have received many messages of support from all sections of our people, who have asked me to convey to you their disgust at the way I was treated. Representatives of noted major democratic organisations of South Africa have assured me that no one in any way authorised to speak on behalf of any respectable South African representative group approached the College to have my invitation withdrawn: rather, they would want me to have been heard.

We are concerned as to the true source of the pressures to which the College gave in, to prevent any chance of critical discussion of mental health problems in South Africa. We note that the College has given hospitality to pro-Government Professors of Psychiatry from South Africa: though such contacts are more likely to be in breach of the College's recent resolution, as by such means support and encouragement is given to those responsible for providing seriously sub-standard psychiatric and medical care to the majority of our people.

We note that several senior Fellows of the College have had no scruples whatsoever about earning generous honoraria from drug companies for visiting South Africa,

often repeatedly, and giving largely undistinguished presentations of information already readily available to us, and usually irrelevant to our real professional problems. Those in the College concerned with censoring me, in their shabby exercise in academic apartheid, should take more interest in such visits.

What the College did was to shamelessly surrender to a tiny group who titillate themselves by meddling in affairs they do not understand, in victimising the victims, in their self-glorifying roles as self-appointed spokesmen for those they never listen to.

I write because I believe that an indiscriminate, decerebrate, academic boycott such as the College exercised is immoral, professionally unethical, and an unwarranted threat to the health and well-being of already underprivileged people. I do not accept that the President was right to act as he did, or to try to sneak through such a dishonourable breach of formal College policy, behind the scenes, without proper debate by the Membership, to whom he is answerable.

I look forward to being enabled to address the College properly at a major College meeting at some early opportunity. Perhaps, though, my address on such an occasion could include the material the President banned me from presenting in 1987; it could be a more formal presentation on issues of academic freedom, and the responsibility of psychiatrists in situations such as ours.

MICHAEL A. SIMPSON

*PO Box 51*

*Pretoria 0001, South Africa*

*Dr Birley replies*

I understand Professor Simpson's indignation at the withdrawal of his two papers, and I am sorry that he felt that my attempts at explanation, in my "curiously worded letter" and in our conversations, were inadequate.

The interpretation of our Council Resolution is clearly a matter for debate, but the views expressed to me, in protest at Professor Simpson's speaking, were strong and articulate and from a wide variety of well-informed sources. They felt that a speaker from an apartheid university was not acceptable and would give an unfortunate impression to the ethnic minorities in this country who already view psychiatry with some alarm and suspicion.

Professor Simpson does not mention that the original invitation from the College was for him to have the opportunity to speak about his experiences to the College's Unethical Practices Committee. This Committee heard from Dr Koryagin in the morning and, after lunch, when both were our guests, we heard from Professor Simpson.

DR J. L. T. BIRLEY

*President*

### *Estimating hospital bed numbers*

DEAR SIRS

I am afraid that Dr Marjot's letter on Estimating Hospital Bed Numbers (*Bulletin*, December 1987) contains an error which renders his conclusions invalid.