

AMOSSHE

CONNECT

THE JOURNAL OF

*The Association of
Managers of
Student Services in
Higher Education*

No.5 SPRING 1999



Contents

Editorial

Articles

- 1** Why Fees make Sense
Sir David Watson

- 5** Is God Head of Student Services?
The Role of University Chaplaincy
Rev Anthony Cane and Fleur Dorrell

- 7** The Cascade of Bidet Effect–
The Role of the Middle Manager
Robin Dollery

- 9** Conducting a Withdrawal Survey
Susan Aldridge and Jennifer Rowley

- 12** How the universities handle a Meningitis outbreak?
Results of a National Survey
Jane Mackinnon, M Stuart Watson

- 17** A Week in the Life of a Head of Student Services during a Meningitis Incident
Sheilagh Gunston

Editorial

Sharing ideas, sharing good practice, sharing experience: these have always been a hallmark of how Student Services in higher education operate. This is what CONNECT is for. We hope this, our fifth issue, helps make useful connections for you.

On behalf of our readers, warm thanks are extended to our authors, and also to those who have given editorial support to the production of articles in this issue: Jenny Greenard, Sheilagh Gunston, John Rolfe and Chris Thornton.

New contributors to CONNECT and new ideas and suggestions on how the journal can be developed are always welcome.

Please contact:

Chris Thornton

Tel. 01273 642850

E-mail c.k.thornton@bton.ac.uk

or

John Rolfe

Tel. 0191 227 4200

E-mail john.rolfe@unn.ac.uk

Why Fees Make Sense

This article is based upon the author's contribution to a debate entitled "Can higher education survive fees?" sponsored by the School of Historical and Critical Studies, University of Brighton, on 8 December 1997

Sir David Watson, Director, University of Brighton

The Expansion of Higher Education

British higher education has experienced two spurts of expansion since World War II. After the Robbins Report in 1963, "new" universities (like Sussex) were created, and doubled the number of students in the system from a little over a quarter of a million to a little over half a million. The Age Participation Rate (APR) – the proportion of each cohort of 18-21 year-olds going to university – went up from about 5% to about 14%. Then in the mid 1980s – after a period when Keith Joseph had sought to cut numbers in universities – the Conservative government, led by Secretary of State Kenneth Baker, took the brakes off what was clearly a pent-up demand for higher education (in the former polytechnic sector as well as the universities), and allowed the system to double in size again – from about 800,000 students to over one and a half million, and to an APR of over 30%. This second expansion lasted until about 1992, when the government realised it had opened up an "uncapped" financial commitment, especially to pay maintenance support for full time students. However, what is really important for this debate is that, in the post-Baker expansion, HE not only grew, it also changed.

The most significant changes were in terms of who participated. The post-Robbins expansion had created some exciting new institutions – not least the polytechnics. But in social terms it had mostly meant more of the same. It was the post-Baker expansion that brought women into higher education (where they are now a slight majority – as they are in the population at large), that opened up opportunities for mature students (now over a third of all full-time students), that improved opportunities for part-time study and study at different levels (there is now a majority of all students in UK HE who are not on full-time first degrees, while the fastest rate of growth has been in post-graduate and post-experience courses), that improved participation by ethnic minorities

(if only unevenly), and finally that began to improve the prospects of participation by students from working-class families (who are still highly under-represented, but have, for the first time since before Robbins marginally improved their success rate in entry). Expansion has meant greater fairness in higher education – even if this has come at the price of pressures on facilities, on resources and above all on the quality of life of all who work in the institutions. What is more, there is now very clear evidence that restricting participation reduces fairness. Sadly, when institutions can act conservatively on admissions they do.

Expansion has brought another bit of good news. Despite all of the prophecies of doom about the educational effects of expansion (as in Kingsley Amis' prediction that "more will mean worse"), the "new" students that have come into higher education have proved their ability to succeed – often against considerable odds – at least as well as their predecessors in a more generously funded but socially restricted age. We are nowhere near using up what Robbins referred to as the pool of people with "ability to benefit" from higher education.

Who Pays for Higher Education, How and When
But the two surges of expansion differed in another way. Crudely, the first was fully funded by the state. The second was not. The post-Baker system expanded – initially in the polytechnic sector and then with the "traditional" universities rapidly catching up – at marginal costs in terms of the funding of institutions. The effects have been extreme. Again, crudely, UK higher education institutions are educating each student on a little over half the resources they had available at the beginning of the 1980s. People who have worked in HE throughout this period can recognise the effects. "Efficiency" has been hugely increased, but has been accompanied by severe decline in

buildings, in facilities, in staff pay, in research infrastructure and in a host of other vital areas.

This is what led directly to the crisis of the summer of 1996, when a majority of all institutions faced deficits, when the heads of institutions declared they could not maintain quality without additional resources, and when in response to the prospect of some universities and colleges charging their own "top-up" fees, the then government and the opposition colluded to establish the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the "Dearing Committee"). They also agreed that the Committee should not report until the summer of 1997 – after the election – by which time, of course, their roles had been reversed.

Public Support for Students: Some Hard Facts

So far I have focused on effects on institutions. Things have also been very hard for students, not least since the Conservative government decided to freeze the value of the basic grant, to withdraw entitlement to benefit (such as housing benefit and signing-on in vacations) and then progressively to shift the grant itself to a loan, now representing 50% of the basic state support. There is real evidence of student hardship, as revealed by the annual surveys of student finances conducted by the University of Brighton. But that hardship is also intensively concentrated, on those without parental or other family support, and especially on mature students and those with family obligations. Some other students, with significant personal and family resources have fared comparatively well, thus underlining how misleading it is to base policy on statistics like "average" student debt. Fundamentally a system of support designed for a more selective, and a more generously funded age has broken down. The policy dilemma is about how to fix it in the best interests of students and the quality of education which they receive.

Before we decide exactly how to fix it – and in particular what best to do about grants loans and fees, it is very important to get some hard facts straight.

First, it is not true that UK HE has always been "free". Prior to the 1962 Education Act, which established the right to a grant, and to having fees (which were themselves set by the state) paid through local authorities, most full-time students in higher education were supported on a mixture of discretionary grants, loans and scholarships.

Secondly, the UK package of support for full-time students is relatively generous in international terms. Of the approximately £7b which the state puts into higher education each year, about £2.4b goes to pay the maintenance grants and fees. The £7b represents about the same (adjusted for population) as the OECD average, but in the comparator nations nearly all of this goes into institutions to support the education supplied rather than to students to support their living costs, especially when they are living away from home.

Thirdly, the way that this benefit (grants, fees and access to loans) is distributed at present is hugely regressive. Today, if you come from one of the Registrar-General's top two social groups (A and B) you have a seven times higher chance of participating in higher education than if you come from the bottom two groups (D and E). What is more, the way the benefit is spread in essence pays money back to the top income groups – especially to those who have invested in private education in the secondary stage. The Institute of Fiscal Studies regularly tracks the effect of welfare benefits on different income groups. Most social services (health, social security, education etc.) are, as you would expect them to be, mildly "pro-poor", that is, the beneficiaries get slightly more out of the system than they pay in through taxes. The single stark example of a "pro-rich" benefit is tertiary (or higher) education taken away from home. We have set this up so that it is a huge bargain for the better-off. In doing so, we have simultaneously lost the chance of making a significant social investment in the less well-off.

Fourth, it is important to note that the vast majority of participants in post-compulsory education already pay their fees. At least one third of the students registered at the University of Brighton do so. Included in this category are all part-timers (who have been hit at least as much as full-timers by other changes in the benefit system), all post-graduate students, and all students in further education. On average, they are personally responsible for about one quarter of the actual costs of their courses, which the £1,000 flat-rate fee would mirror for full-timers in higher education.

The Dearing Proposals

The Dearing Committee (of which I was a member) struggled to square these various circles: of maintaining expansion and quality without extra public money; of balancing the interests of

students in maintaining a dignified and productive life-style and of institutions in marshalling the resources necessary to teach them; of holding on to the historic strengths of UK HE while supporting constructive change (not least in terms of widened participation); and of securing both the short-term and the medium term future of the sector. Our key recommendations on funding were structured around three fundamental conclusions.

First, that the system desperately needs new money if it is to maintain quality and standards; if, in other words, students are to continue to receive awards that will mean something to them, to employers, and to a structured system of life-long learning, it needs an urgent injection of new resources.

Secondly, that what state support there is within the system for maintenance and living costs should be directed towards those who really need it.

Thirdly, that in terms of the life-time prospects of graduates – which do vary, but which in general show a huge economic advantage over non-graduates – it is fair to expect a contribution to the costs of higher education provided that these are recovered on an income-contingent basis. Importantly, this advantage has been maintained – at a rate of about 11-14% of lifetime earnings – while the system has quadrupled in size.

I don't have time to go into details of the Committee's analysis, or of its modelling of the various options: balancing loans and grants; maintenance and fees; subsidised and real rates of interest; repayment rates and thresholds; exclusions and pre-payment dividends; immediate and long-term returns; and so on.

At the end of the day we analysed and presented two variants on a graduate tax (one flat-rate, the other differential), which we judged would be unacceptable for political reasons for at least the foreseeable future. We then offered four core options: one (option A in the report) based upon the present government's manifesto commitment – to phase out all grants in favour of loans but not to charge fees – and another (C) adding a means-tested fee to this. Our preferred option (B) retained the present grant and loan arrangements for maintenance but added the 25% flat rate fee in the form of an income-contingent loan.

The philosophy of this is simple: access to maintenance is directly related to students' personal circumstances while they are studying and justifies differential investment by the state; fees in the form of a graduate contribution are more about the different life-chances of students after they graduate, and hence can justifiably be levied on a uniform basis. We also had a more radical version of this philosophy (option D) which would in essence have fully restored grants for those who need them most, through progressive tapering of the means test, abolished the maintenance loan, and added the flat-rate income contingent fee contribution.

Mixed in with these options was a series of other ideas, on expanding access funds (and making them available to part-time students), on reviewing the benefits system, on cutting down transaction costs in running the system, on paying bursaries for those (like teachers and health professionals) whom the state has an interest in subsequently employing, on using the Inland Revenue to collect graduate contributions, and, most importantly, on fixing the national accounting system (which at present treats all loans in Public Expenditure terms as if they are grants and are never going to be repaid, and hence hugely inflates the costs of higher education on the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement). But the germ of the recommendations can be summed up in terms of seeking a fair contribution to costs of higher education from those who benefit from it, supporting through state subsidies those who need help while studying, and restoring the ability of the institutions to offer high quality education.

The "New Labour" Response

On 23 July, 1997, Secretary of State David Blunkett went to the despatch box in the House of Commons, welcomed the Dearing Report and with immense political courage stated that the needs of the system were such that higher education would have to be supported in part by a graduate contribution. He then went on to outline a system of fees and loans that fits no one of the Dearing options, ignores a lot of other analysis and will, I believe if unamended, lead to a series of negative and unintended consequences.

I will proceed to try to demonstrate this, but I want to start by repeating, unambiguously, that I believe he was right to endorse the principle of fees and right to recognise the crisis into which the system had slipped, largely as a result of the policies of the previous government.

In summary, the government has decided both to eliminate the grant (by turning it all into loans over a two year period) and to bring in fees at the "Dearing" rate (although it will means-test these so that, for example, one-third of students will not have to pay them at all). It has also picked up the recommendations on access funds (although not yet on benefits), introduced an extra £250 loan for the most needy, and calibrated the whole package so that no family will have to pay more up-front than at present. On this basis he and the Prime Minister were able to promise about an additional £129m into the system for 1997-98 (the Dearing estimate of the shortfall was £365m, but this is a good start), thereby reducing the anticipated "efficiency gain" to less than 1%, and to promise an extra 50,000 students into the system by the end of the Parliament (although mostly on to HNC and HND courses in FE), thereby returning to expansion and an anticipated APR of about 35%.

The government is also legislating through the Teaching and Higher Education Act to build in safe-guards against future governments radically increasing the fees (although not as securely as in the Dearing recommendations, which would have required an affirmative resolution in support of any change in both houses) and to prevent individual institutions from charging their own "top-up" fees (which the CVCP has agreed would be unnecessary provided that the government keeps its side of the "compact").

The "new Labour" mixture is, however, highly problematic not least in terms of the following consequences: students from poorer families (because of greater exposure to loan) will end up by owing more than those from richer families when they enter working-life; similarly, because of the public subsidy involved in the loan the amount of "regressive" public expenditure will be increased, not decreased; means-testing the loan will be a costly administrative nightmare (not least in relation to students from elsewhere in the EU), and its administrative costs will dramatically reduce the sums available for the improvement of education; and; without changes to national accounting, the amount advanced in loans will hugely increase the formal public expenditure on higher education without directly benefiting institutions or their students.

Where are we now

So where does this mixture of history and present politics leave us? In short, I believe that we have

a misguided campaign against a perverse proposal. Higher education can certainly survive fees: I have tried to show how, under appropriate safeguards they are right and fair, if students are to receive the kind of education they deserve, institutions are to flourish and their staff are to be properly supported. What is more we are really debating a much narrower topic: whether or not full-time higher education can survive fees: part-time, post-graduate and continuing education has already survived (and in difficult times prospered) with a fee regime. Interestingly, there is also growing support outside of HE for this proposal. According to MORI between 1991 and 1997 the number of parents saying that they would be prepared to contribute to tuition costs has gone up from 35% to 83%, while the number of adults at large agreeing that if higher education needs additional resources they should partly come from graduates has gone up from 42% to 69%. Part of this change of heart is undoubtedly explained by public recognition that there are also other urgent priorities for public expenditure on education: primary school class size; school buildings; and support for the even more hard-pressed further education sector, for example.

Whether higher education can survive the final abolition of the maintenance grant and remain true to its mission is a more serious issue, and one about which I am personally much more worried. Dearing wished to preserve grant support, and offered ways in which it could be reformed to be more socially equitable. That is where the NUS and its allies ought to be focusing their attention, as the Green Paper on Lifelong Learning is published, and as the government's legislation progresses. There is a window of opportunity, since this is the part of the government programme that is due to be phased, and where changes in the PSBR rules could bring back enormous resources (over £1b per year) into the system.

Going to the barricades on fees not only misses this far more important target, it also runs the danger of appearing parochial and even selfish. It ignores the needs of those students who now pay fees and receive no benefit. It also runs the risk, after an era in which higher education has become open and more fair, especially for full-time participants, of refusing that system the resources it needs in the future; in other words of pulling the ladder up behind you. That cannot be right.

Is God Head of Student Services? The Role of University Chaplaincy

*Revd. Anthony Cane (Anglican Chaplain) and Fleur Dorrell (Catholic Chaplain)
University of Brighton*

How do you make God Laugh? You tell Him your future plans! So we did and He had hysterics. In common with most Chaplains, perhaps particularly those working in "new" Universities, we have found initial expectations and assumptions challenged in all kinds of ways. Who would have thought that as much of our work would be with staff as with students, and those of little or no religious affiliation as well as practising members of many world faiths beyond Christianity? So here we are in our new centre at Steam House (a former pub, recently bought and 'converted' by the University!), taking the opportunity this article presents, to reflect on our role, and hoping that we are doing some good. As we do so, across the University 16,000 students and 2,000 staff go about the business of learning and teaching - how do we show them what Chaplaincy is about, and that we are here for them? With a team of only two full-timers and five part-timers this is a challenging task.

Being part of the Student Services Department is a good basis for us to begin our work, as it means that we are acknowledged in a way that is not always the case when Chaplaincies are more peripheral to University structures. This is indeed a strength at Brighton. The staff are open and helpful to us and recognise that we are not the religious equivalent of the hard sell salesperson! However, it is important to note that we also maintain an independence from institutional agendas and issues because of the unusual way our role is structured. Our salaries are paid by the churches and day-to-day resources are provided by the University. We are therefore "in" the University but not entirely "of" the University.

Our base in Student Services can imply to some, that our work is entirely problem centred, or as only concerned with students. There is some truth here, particularly as our pastoral role is indeed at the heart of what we do. However, much of our work in this area is not structured on the referral/appointment model of the personal counsellor. On reflection, some of the most important conversations we have, take place in corridors and refectories. "Best bit of counselling I ever had," said a member of staff six months after a chat of about three minutes in a car park! Going out to where staff and students are, rather than expecting them to come and find us, is the "bread and butter" of Chaplaincy work.

This "going out" is no mean feat, as Brighton is a split site University spreading as far as Eastbourne. This means that hopping between sites is both necessary and aerobic! Our task is to try and visit all the campuses regularly and be available for staff and students; whether for that quick chat, usually over a coffee, or for more serious, specific and ongoing problems. Our visits are also about appreciating both the people we meet at many levels, and the positive contributions that they make throughout the University. Very often, appreciation of others and one's colleagues is neglected in society, and yet, it is one of the most basic and necessary ways of showing respect and dignity to humanity. Without it we become robots. Inherent in our ability to show respect and thanks to those around us, is the time we give to listening or empathising with people's difficulties and stress. It is a Chaplaincy truism that "almost everyone feels unappreciated" and we take the opportunities we can to value people and what they are achieving, often against the odds.

As well as spending much time with people on an informal or one-to-one basis, we organise a variety of group events. We provide opportunities for socialising, weekly worship, pilgrimage and celebration. Whether it is through a fresher's week party, a trip to the Taize community in France, daily prayers at Steam House, or the University Carol Service, we are gently and slowly building a community that is fun and meaningful.

The Carol Service is an example of the kind of creative and community building work the Chaplaincy is able to achieve. Last year a good hundred people were involved (in addition to the large crowd on the day), from the choirs and orchestra, to the technicians setting up two giant screens and a pair of slide projectors twenty feet off the ground. The Chaplains co-ordinate, plan, invite, cajole, choose a relevant theme and rehearse readers... and then for the most sit back and let the event take its course. A large cross-section of the University take part and attend, and consume large quantities of sherry and mince pies afterwards!

Although the Carol Service is a successful instance of the chaplains as community builders, frequently we feel we have only managed to use a few bricks. Our role then teaches us much humility and trust, as well as ensuring that we savour what does go well. A second example of an event to savour is an

annual Christmas lunch and tea dance organised for one hundred local pensioners. Once again the chaplains have developed a co-ordinating role. This has included evincing appearances by the Chairman of the Board of Governors as Father Christmas, and encouraging a member of the Students Union to find a new vocation as a bingo caller with panache. As the mayor and local councillors also attend, the event has significance in terms of fostering good relations between the University and the town.

The Chaplaincy annual report often divides our work into the areas of "pastoral", "institutional" and "educational." A flavour of what the first two mean can be gleaned from the above paragraphs. The third area, the "Educational", refers most obviously to formal teaching, which in this University means contributing to religious education courses at Diploma, undergraduate and Masters level. There is also a termly chaplaincy lecture, at which external speakers can be heard on a range of subjects ranging from science and religion to global citizenship. Next year, 1999, will see an ambitious series of interdisciplinary Millennium lectures taking place at Brighton which have been initiated and organised by the Chaplaincy in collaboration with the University Directorate.

In what has been written so far we have tried to give a sense of how the Chaplaincy operates in putting into practice the opening line of its Mission Statement: "...to contribute as effectively as possible to every aspect of university life from its particular religious perspective." A useful summary of these different areas can be found on the University's Web page, which announces that the Chaplains:

- offer **pastoral care** and support to all members of the university, both students and staff, whether of any faith or none.
- **organise events** including lectures, social occasions, opportunities for worship, pilgrimages and weekends away.
- take part in **formal teaching**, and provide a resource for projects or essays which have a religious dimension
- **provide contacts** with (and information about) local churches and student societies

This summary gives some shape to the often intangible work of Chaplaincy. But may be it is precisely the less tangible aspects of our work that are the most crucial. In attempting to give a sense of this, it may help to pose the following question: "what would the University be like if it did not

have Chaplains?" No doubt everything would carry on working efficiently enough; after all, although we are involved in teaching, our absence would not be crucial in this respect. The question can be answered both practically and symbolically. Practically, it is unlikely that anyone else (particularly given the ever increasing workloads of most staff) would be able to take on many of the things that Chaplains do, from the organisation of events on behalf of the University, to our regular cross-campus visits. Our particular role in responding (and helping others to respond) to traumatic pastoral situations, such as the death of a student or staff member, would be hard to replace.

But what of the less tangible, symbolic aspects? We have picked up from a myriad conversations and comments something of what Chaplaincy represents to members of the University. It definitely has to do with such things as: community, value, integrity, hope, potential, moral purpose; of something beyond the day-to-day, a broader context and vision, of opportunities for being rather than doing, a time to be human, a language taking in the mysteries of life and death and the way to live now.

The previous sentence is of a rather different kind to that used to describe the production of a "Which Church?" booklet or detailing involvement in University committees (from greening to research ethics). However without it this article might be in danger of offering a reductionist account of the significance and role of Chaplaincy.

To be a Chaplain demands a wide variety of skills in a University that is so large and disparate. A sense of humour seems particularly important! Above all we seek to be non-judgmental, listening and supportive people whose main object is the person in front of us. In this we find our deepest resources in the religious traditions that have shaped and continue to shape us. From this perspective we have been known to speculate about which job Jesus might have taken in a University (apart from the obvious role awaiting him as a chippie in the Estates Department!) Would he be a Director, a cleaner, a lecturer, Head of Student Services or even a Chaplain?

Certainly we believe that we bring God to the University in the many ways we work: through our activities and the events we hold, through our availability and genuine support, and through our daily prayers. Christianity is always a challenge and it demands new approaches both explicit and implicit. The most important tool we can learn from it, and one which we would hope our University could receive from us, is quite simply this - that we are there for them, because God is there for us.

The Cascade and Bidet Effect – The Role of the Middle Manager

Robin Dollery, Student Services Co-ordinator, De Montfort University, Lincoln

How do we make sense of our role as Student Services managers?

As middle managers we can sometimes find ourselves in the unenviable position of having all sorts of pressure and demands heaped upon us from on high while at the same time being subjected to equally pressing and vigorous demands from staff in our Student Services teams. On a good day this is all grist to the mill and we thrive on the immediacy and involvement. On a bad day, however, it can feel intolerable and sometimes lead us to either react inappropriately, or internally feel drained or chewed up by the experience. Is the Student Services domain simply parallel to other middle managers in large institutions or businesses or are there aspects peculiar to this section of HE provision? The following attempts to raise some points to contribute to the discussion.

Although job descriptions of Student Services Managers vary considerably across the country there are dilemmas which are similar. We are faced with colleagues who are at the cutting edge, working with students often in very difficult personal or practical situations. Indeed some of us will be delivering services alongside our managerial role. It is arguable that we represent the most human aspect of our institutions, as students who need face to face responses to their enquiries and difficulties are most likely to end up with one of the constituent elements of our services. For every generalised policy statement our institution makes we can think of an individual student to whom it applies or who provides the exception. The generalised becomes specific, it is real and 'in our faces'.

At the same time we also have budgets to manage, staff development programmes to influence, HEFC assessments to contribute to, the day to day management of often strongly individual members of staff, the processing and making sense of depersonalised policies and protocols which seem far removed from our face to face contact with students. We stand at the interface between the institutional and the personal.

Making sense of at least some of what is happening around us gives us the opportunity at

best to make informed decisions and at the very least be more measured in our response. The work of Menzies and Jacques (De Board 1979) drew attention to how institutions can sometimes develop ways of working which act primarily as a defence against anxiety rather than the most efficient method of administration. For example within the DSS decisions are often not made face to face with claimants at the local benefits office. Decisions on cases are dealt with elsewhere in the building, or in geographically quite separate locations. One effect of this seemingly inefficient series of 'hand-offs' is that difficult decisions can be made more easily if they are separated from the individual concerned – the anxiety of having to perhaps refuse or disappoint face to face is therefore deferred or displaced. Within our own institutions there can be found many such examples where there are most frustrating inefficiencies which do not seem necessary but have the effect of displacing the anxiety to some point within the institution which is removed from direct contact with the student or member of staff. Whilst this is frustrating in itself we are also in the main prevented from using such mechanisms to divert our own anxieties because of the very nature of the way in which Student Services function – it is the place where 'hand-offs' occur least. The tutor may know full well that the student enquiring about alternative sources of finance hasn't got a hope and needs to get a job but refers the student to the welfare adviser to pass on the news. The University itself throws material our way which is the result of the way the place functions as much as it is in line with our official job descriptions.

Wilfred Bion building on the work of Klein theorised that the maternal mind provides a capacity for thinking and understanding which the infant can introject and form the basis of his or her own thinking capacity (Symington 1996). This function can be disrupted or prevented from developing if the mother cannot contain the needs and demands of the child. Translating these ideas into our own adult situations possibly gives us some insight into difficulties faced within our own teams. When we are at our most pressured and our resources are at their most stretched, our own capacity to think is sabotaged or at least restricted

and hence our ability to provide that space for others in our teams or institutions is also impaired.

For example we can sometimes be on the receiving end of what might seem awkward and demanding behaviour from our staff. There may be a problem which is hurled at us with an expectation that we will immediately be able to respond and take the problem away or provide a suitable answer. If we turn it around and ask what suitable solutions they could suggest it is spat back at us as 'that's your job!', or 'I haven't got time to sort that out I am too busy', implying that we have more spare time than they. This can indeed be infuriating particularly if you have just received a briefing paper for an important meeting to be held tomorrow which you *must* attend to represent Student Services. Our capacity to receive what in some ways is an attack on us is severely depleted by other demands from colleagues and the institution at large. We would like to be equally direct and dismissive in our response to both our team member and also the line manager. We may indeed have some pretty graphic fantasies about what we would like to happen to these individuals and for sure we will buy the lottery ticket this weekend!

However, if our capacity for understanding and insight is not sidelined for too long we may yet be able to make an informed and measured response to these pressures. Translating Bion's ideas on containment we can not only absorb some of these pressures but also process them and hand them back to their originators in a modified form which allows the possibility of thinking about the situation. This may mean simply receiving the problem and promising to think about it, thereby containing the anxiety. If we simply throw the query straight back at the enquirer we run the risk of passing the anxiety back with knobs on, the original stress is then potentially multiplied. We can find ourselves locked into a reactive and defensive behaviour which appeals to the most primitive qualities within us all, leading to a spiralling deterioration in our professional relationships. The capacity to be creative in a situation possibly comes *after* we feel listened to and understood. Before our staff can put forward creative suggestions their own capacity for thought has to be restored. This is not to suggest that our role as manager is equated with that of the mother or that such interactions are anything other than normal, indeed it may be a member of our team who provides us with the space that we need. Likewise these are not permanent states either but describe times when harmony within

teams is strained and our limits as managers severely tested.

The mother is best able to contain the primitive fears and anxieties of her child when she is herself supported perhaps by a partner and/or an extended network represented by the family. This 'nursing triad' was first described by Winnicott (Abram 1996) when he was describing the concept of the 'good-enough mother'. The mother who is able to withstand the demands of her child and provide a secure environment finds it hard to sustain and be just 'good-enough' without someone else supporting her, the father or other significant person. Translating that into our own world it seems critical that we ourselves feel supported in our role which allows us a greater capacity to firstly contain some of the pressures and anxieties around us and secondly to process and then act on them in a measured and informed way – in short to be 'good-enough' managers. It is a fine line between feeling on top of the job and thriving in a creative way on all its demands and being swamped from above and below in a way that saps our energy and resource. The need to retain the capacity to make sense of what is happening and to have insight about the institutional workings is critical – to do this on our own is difficult. Counsellors formalise this support in the shape of supervision or consultative support – perhaps there may be some mileage in exploring whether 'thinking space' for managers could be more readily available too.

We need colleagues of like mind and circumstance with whom to share and feel supported - a strong argument indeed for the continuation and development of our own formalised network AMOSSHE.

References

- Symington, The Clinical Thinking of Wilfrid Bion 1996 Routledge
- Abram The Language of Winnicott 1996 Karnac
- Hawkins and Shohet, Supervision in the Helping Professions 1989 Open University
- De Board Psychoanalysis of Organisations 1978 Tavistock
- Hinshelwood, A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought 1989 Free Association

Conducting a Withdrawal Survey

Susan Aldridge, Jennifer Rowley, Edge Hill College of Higher Education

Introduction

There is a justifiable and growing concern about non-completion of programmes of study. This concern is fuelled from two different perspectives:

- a. The concern that government and personal resources are being wasted on students who do not complete their studies and achieve a qualification.
- b. The concern that withdrawal signifies disaffection with a course, and that, accordingly, high withdrawal rates may be viewed as a negative measure of the quality of the student's experience of higher education.

A significant study was funded by HEFC and conducted by research teams at the Centre for Higher Education Development at Liverpool John Moores University and Keele University (York 1997, Ozga 1997). This study sought to identify a profile of non-completion and the reasons for non-completion across a number of United Kingdom higher education institutions. This article seeks to complement this study by describing the approach taken to the conduct of a withdrawal study by one higher education institution. The article outlines some of the considerations that have been taken into account in the design of such a survey and describes the outcomes and benefits of such a survey.

The Context for the Withdrawal Survey at Edge Hill

Edge Hill is a medium sized higher education institution offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses to over 6,000 full and part-time students. Those students have differing experiences of the College, attend the College for different lengths of time, attend in part-time or full-time mode, and, in general, seek different 'benefits' packages from the College. The college has a number of strategies for monitoring student perceptions concerning the quality of the student experience. These include:

1. Module evaluations, which focus on module delivery and content. These are presented in summary form to Subject Boards, School Boards, and ultimately the Academic Standards Committee. Verbal formative feedback is also received from students at Subject Boards and School Boards.
2. Cross-College questionnaires. The College has an established First Week questionnaire which is used to evaluate the induction process. Student Satisfaction surveys have also been conducted

since 1993/94 in various different forms (Aldridge and Rowley 1998).

3. Standing committees of the College which have responsibility for specific or generic service areas, such as the Learning Resource Committee, the Catering Student Committee and Edge Hill Enterprises.
4. College Complaints procedure.
5. The Annual Quality Planning process which draws together quality issues that have arisen during the previous year.

Through these processes Edge Hill collects both quantitative and qualitative data. Berry and Parasuraman (1997) emphasise that in order to improve service organisations must use multiple research approaches, amongst different customer groups in order to ensure that they are hearing what customers are saying. The withdrawal survey at Edge Hill is one of the strategies amongst many that generates data that can be used to inform the management of withdrawal rates.

The Withdrawal Survey

The Withdrawal Survey that has been conducted at Edge Hill for the past two years is a telephone interview survey. A student contract worker has been employed to conduct the interviews. This student is chosen on the basis of their previous experience with telephone interviewing, and is trained with specific reference to this task. All students known to have withdrawn from their study in the College during the year are telephoned. This includes students on full time and part time courses. Table 1 shows the breakdown of withdrawals according to the course and year of course. During 1996/97 the survey was conducted in the summer vacation, but in 1997-98 one round of the survey was conducted around Easter 1998, and a further round, relating to later withdrawals, will be conducted in Summer 1998. Three calls were made to each student over a period of around four weeks. Calls were placed between 6 and 8pm. Most respondents were very happy to answer the questions and were positive about the interview process. The interview approach has been adopted because the person-to-person interaction supports 'relationship' maintenance and marketing, and communicates the College's genuine concerns about those students who have interrupted their studies. The survey is managed through the Student Services area.

The interviewer takes the interviewee through the questions on the Survey form, and conducts a semi-structured interview. These questions cover a number of key areas:

- a. Background information, such as name, address, age and year of withdrawal.
- b. The options considered by the student, including intercalation, and other institutions.
- c. Factors that influenced students to leave, in relation to:
 - i. Study experience
 - ii. Personal experience

Students were asked to cite any of the factors that contributed to their withdrawal; most students specified more than one factor.

The survey in 1996/97 did not seek to investigate the situation further if students cited personal issues. It became evident that it would be valuable to enquire more fully in relation to personal circumstances, and accordingly in 1997/98 more explicit questions were included which probed these issues more fully. The development of the interview schedule between the two years took into account the questions being posed in other studies (e.g. Yorke, 1997), but it does mean that the results between the two years are not comparable in every respect.

Finally, interviewers invited interviewees to comment on any factors that would have helped them to change their mind about leaving, and whether they would like to take the opportunity to discuss their future options.

Survey Results

The number of students interviewed during the survey has varied with differing withdrawal rates from one year to the next. In general response rates of around 50% have been achieved, and this has led to the generation of some useful data. This data can be analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Table 1 and 2 summarise the data from the survey over the past two years.

Table 1 demonstrates that a considerable proportion of the students are either considering returning, have moved on to other institutions, changed to another course at EHUC, or would welcome support in considering their options. In other words, although for a variety of reasons this experience of higher education was not satisfactory, they are determined to return to higher education.

The reason for withdrawal can be divided into those associated with Study and those associated with Personal issues. In 1996/97 98% of students

indicated one of the study related categories as being significant. But in 1997/98 the focus has switched to study reasons. This switch may be real or it may be a result of the change in the interview schedule. In the Study category the highest percentage related to students who found the course to be not as they have expected. Study difficulties and the institution not being as they expected were also cited by a number of students. With respect to personal reasons, travelling difficulties, financial difficulties, and domestic difficulties were cited key problem areas.

Conclusion

Useful quantitative and qualitative data has been collected which yields an insight into the process of, and reasons for withdrawal. It is reasonable to expect that the significance of these reasons might vary from one institution to another, and over time, so it is perhaps surprising that the key factors identified in this study are consistent with those in earlier studies. The key factors influencing withdrawal are:

Course not as expected
 Travelling difficulties
 Institution not as expected
 Domestic difficulties
 Financial difficulties

A recurrent theme through all of the studies on withdrawal is the appropriateness of the course. This emphasises the significance of course in initial decision to enter higher education, and then subsequent decisions relating to continuation. It may be worthwhile to investigate student decision making processes associated with course selection, and, later withdrawal, more fully. Amongst the factors that determine course selection are:

Employment prospects on completion
 Student interest and stimulation
 Student preparedness and confidence at entry into higher education

Undoubtedly students make decisions concerning the choice of institution and course with very limited information; it is very difficult for them to have any real understanding of how they will respond to the higher education experience.

References

- Aldridge, S and Rowley, J E (1998) Measuring customer satisfaction in higher education survey. *Quality Assurance in Education* 6 (4), 197-204.
 Ozga, J (1977); Undergraduate non-completion in higher education in England; Report 2. London: HEFCE
 Yorke, M (1997); Undergraduate non-completion in higher education in England; Report 1. London: HEFCE

Table 1: The Way Forward

	1996/97 %	1997/98 %
Considered Intercalation	39	35
Considering Returning	39	33
Went to a New Institution	22	21
Returned to Edge Hill University College for a new course	8	0
Would like to come in for a chat	18	29

Table 2: Reasons for Withdrawal

	1997/98 %
Study	
Institution not as expected	20
Course not as expected	48
Study difficulties	21
Course too difficult	11
Attitude of teaching staff	14
No longer wish to teach	14
Unavailability of course/modules	14
Inappropriate teaching methods	5
Lack of learning support	12
Professional Practice/placement difficulties	9
Attitude of staff in placement area	6
Personal	
Personal accommodation	9
Health reasons	9
Domestic difficulties	20
Attitude of student support staff	0
Financial difficulties	17
Homesickness	6
Travelling difficulties	23
Emotional/relationship difficulties	5
Seeking/found work	12
Lack of student support	5

How do Universities handle a Meningitis outbreak? Results of a National Survey

*Jane A. Mackinnon, Research Assistant,
M. Stuart Watson, Lecturer,
University of Aberdeen Department of Public Health*

Introduction

Meningococcal disease has attracted much attention in the past few years due to a reported increase in the number of cases seen^(1,2). A change has also been seen in the way the disease is presenting^(3,4). There has been an increase in the amount of cases presenting with septicaemia, a factor of great concern as this is the more rapid form of the disease and has a higher fatality rate (>20%) than meningitis alone (7-10%)^(5,6). This has reinforced the importance of early recognition and treatment in reducing the illness and death resulting from meningococcal disease.

The University Experience

In recent years many universities and colleges have experienced cases of meningitis. Figures show that university students are at a higher risk than non-students of the same age, and this risk is higher still in those in first year living in halls of residence. When a case occurs in a university the news travels quickly and panic can result. In the past information leaflets, newsletters and help-lines have been shown to be effective at reducing anxiety amongst affected parties⁽⁷⁾. The Committee for Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) has recently published a document of Best Practice Guidelines for higher education institutions to follow in the event of any cases of meningitis⁽⁸⁾. This document deals with every aspect of meningitis and outlines what the chain of events should be following a suspected case. These are guidelines which every institution should be aware of as they provide comprehensive and thorough information enabling an institution to be well prepared should the need arise.

Cardiff and Southampton Universities have both experienced serious episodes of meningitis, which have greatly increased the profile of the disease in universities. The huge political and media involvement made these situations extremely high profile and a huge amount of pressure was placed on the universities to take some action. The result of this was mass vaccination campaigns in both universities. The only meningococcal vaccine available for use currently however is not

recommended for routine use. This means that the major form of prevention has to be awareness of the symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia. It is hoped that early recognition will in turn lead to fewer cases ending with serious illness or death. The problem lies in informing people without causing undue alarm and panic.

Study Aims

This paper reports a postal survey of current support systems for meningococcal disease in Universities of the UK. From the results of this survey, recommendations are made to help institutions deal with meningitis.

The survey was carried out in order to identify the current procedures and guideline use regarding meningitis within universities. The types of meningitis awareness work which is carried out in universities at the present time was investigated along with other areas which are important in the preparation for and management of any cases. The level of interest in a best practice guideline for universities to follow was also assessed.

Methods

Following a literature review to identify key themes for investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with student support staff at Aberdeen University in order to ensure that all areas of interest were included in the survey. A list of key themes for the questionnaire was constructed and the questions developed. The questionnaire was piloted with the help of the student support staff and any necessary alterations made.

The final anonymised version of the questionnaire was then sent out to the Heads of Student Support Services in all 89 universities of the UK. A second questionnaire and reminder letter was sent to any university which had not replied within a month and a final telephone reminder was given to any who did not respond within a further three weeks. Following this any persistent

non-responders were excluded from the study. The results were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Results

A total of 71 (80%) of the 89 universities surveyed replied to the questionnaire

University Details

The differences in student numbers in universities was found to be enormous ranging from 708 up as high as 83,000 in one multi-campus university. Also the number of students in halls of residence ranged from 750 up to 18,612 and the number of overseas students ranged from 215 up to 27,420. This shows the huge variation between universities in their organisation and composition. All universities should have a high level of preparation for meningitis but those with many students in Halls of Residence should be particularly prepared.

Of the 71 universities 47(66%) reported having working links with local Health Authorities / Boards and Public Health Officials. This did not appear to be affected by the presence of a medical school or Public Health Department within the university.

Student Care

A total of 68 (96%) universities provided a 24-hour point of contact for students living in halls of residence. 78% of this care was provided by wardens and 43% by custodial staff (caretakers and porters). 34 (48%) universities provided a 24-hour point of contact for students living in private accommodation. A total of 42 (59%) of universities have their own student health service. Such a service provides a ready contact for students if they become ill rather than having to hunt for local GP's. A number of universities in the study expressed their concern at not having such a service or being about to close one as they felt this would be a great loss to their students.

Staff Training

Of the universities providing wardenial care 65% of them provide meningitis awareness training. This is provided annually in most cases and once per term in only three universities. Only 34% of the universities provide awareness training for custodial staff. Again most of this is annual. A total of 63% of the universities provide awareness training for their medical staff. Most of them give training 'as regarded necessary'. Training received by medical staff as part of their original

medical training was not classed as specific meningitis awareness training as it could have been years ago. This is important in light of the current changes in presentation seen with fewer cases presenting with the classical meningitis symptoms and more with the septicaemia.

Management Procedures

General Crisis Management protocols exist in 56 (79%) of universities and Death of a Student Protocols are used in 59 (83%). Meningitis Guidelines are currently in use in 54 (76%) of universities and are in draft form in a further 6 (9%). It was found that 47 (66%) of the universities have published their Meningitis Guidelines within the last two years.

A total of 61 (86%) universities reported having a chain of notification ready for both halls of residence and private accommodation should a case of meningitis occur.

In all 52 (73%) of the universities provide their staff with contact numbers and procedure guidelines to keep with them at all times to which they can refer in the event of any meningococcal disease at the institution. The need for out of office hours contacts is also a big issue because some staff will effectively need to be on call at all times. This brings with it whole new staffing issues which are not within the scope of this study.

(continues on next page)

Meningitis Awareness

Information about meningitis and its symptoms is routinely issued in 66 (93%) of the universities. 53 (75%) do this in freshers week, 34 (48%) amongst returning students.

Types of Meningitis Awareness Information			
	No(%)		No(%)
Poster campaign	60(85)	Health service enrolment pack	17(24)
Leaflets	66(93)	Meningitis awareness week	39(55)
Freshers fayre	31(44)	Student Newspaper	41(58)
Freshers handbook	17(24)	Student Radio	6(9)
Induction week talks	18(25)	Student Support Website	20(28)
People Involved in Meningitis Awareness Week			
The National Meningitis Trust			26(37)
University Health Services			30(42)
Senior University officials			10(14)
Student Representative Council			8(11)
Student Union			28(39)

Table 1: Forms of information used to increase awareness about meningitis and its symptoms (n=71) and those involved in Meningitis Awareness Weeks.

Support Services

Chaplaincy and counselling services are provided by most universities for all of their students and chaplaincy services are available for staff and parents where necessary too. The counselling needs of staff however should not be overlooked where they have been touched by meningitis. This is a personal experience, which could have a significant impact on any staff involved too as well as the students. Overseas students are catered for by both of these services in all universities and an International Student Support Group exists in 53 (75%) of universities.

Media Involvement

The power of the media is a well recognised phenomenon. This means it is essential that universities are equipped to deal with the huge 'media interest' which surrounds meningitis. 70 (99%) of the universities have a press officer of which only 58 (82%) have a procedure to follow to control media attention in the event of a student illness or death due to meningococcal disease.

Future

A total of only 40 (56%) universities have an Incident Response Team at present. Joint Outbreak Control Teams are established in 31 (44%) of universities. This shows there is considerable room for improvement or options for change in our universities at present.

Discussion

Having conducted this survey it is clear that there is a huge variation of standards between universities in the level of their preparation for dealing with meningitis. Working through these results it was possible to construct recommendations for potential improvements.

It is vital that all universities have well-established links between themselves and local health departments. This will help keep lines of communication ready and clear and form a sound base on which to work together in the event of any cases of meningitis.

A 24-hour point of contact should always be made available to all students whether they live in halls of residence or private accommodation. This means there is always a contact point for anyone concerned about their own health or that of a friend.

University staff such as those in halls of residence who have contact with students should receive comprehensive training in meningitis awareness. This should include wardens in the halls but also staff such as caretakers and cleaning staff who will be in close contact with the students most days. The only problem with giving non-medical staff awareness training is that they must not be led to believe they are in a position to diagnose any illness. Training should be given to make staff aware of symptoms and in what to do and who to

contact should a student become ill. The timing is also important to ensure that awareness is high all year round and does not lapse during the winter months when meningitis is more common.

Most universities will place first year students away from home for the first time in Halls. This group is known to be at an increased risk from meningitis as they encounter new bacteria for the first time and are living in close proximity to a large number of others. The social behaviour of first years is also well known, particularly around Freshers week, to be an added factor in the spread of meningococcal disease through kissing. There is not much which can be done to alter the social contacts formed during this time so the only way to help is to make people aware of the symptoms on meningitis, and this should include the staff.

It is encouraging to see that universities have taken on board the recent increase in the incidence of meningitis and are working at preparing for it shown in the number of meningitis protocols which have been established in the past two years. However it also means that many of these protocols have not yet been tested and flaws will not be found until it is too late. For this reason it is vital that universities share experiences and knowledge with each other and communicate with their local health organisations in order to ensure all aspects of meningitis are considered in the preparations of best practice guidelines.

Further to this, universities were asked for details of the chain of notification which would come into action should any suspected cases of meningitis occur. The chains varied enormously in detail and organisation with some of the 'chains' consisting of only two people. One reply to this question of the university chain of notification was 'not that I'm aware of.', a situation to be ended as everyone should be aware of procedures. In the recently published best practice guidelines for higher education institutions the CVCP provides excellent guidelines for more effective chains of notification.

Standards of good practice could be greatly improved by the establishment of Incident Response Teams in universities and Joint Outbreak Control Teams who work in conjunction with local health organisations. These teams could then pool the work of the university staff and medical experts to advise the public. The collaboration of such teams will enable the

affected university and necessary local health organisations to work together more efficiently and effectively.

There was considerable room for change in the levels of meningitis awareness work which universities currently promote. Many reported only putting leaflets in health centres but this is not an active enough way of communicating the message to the students. The Student Union should be recognised as an important source of disseminating information to students. They will have far more contact with a lot of students and will also be perceived by students as being more on their own level than if they are being lectured to by senior staff. Organisations like the National Meningitis Trust and the Meningitis Research Foundation are also very important sources of help of which all universities should be aware.

Many universities currently have a plan for the distribution of news to inform staff and student populations of the events during a meningitis scare. Fewer universities currently have provision for a help-line with information for students, staff and other concerned parties during any meningitis scares. Again such measures can help keep a situation under control. Help-lines and information like this has been shown to be effective in the past at reducing anxiety and stress amongst interested parties.

When dealing with meningitis the media now plays a significant role, particularly when a cluster or outbreak of cases occur. If handled appropriately the media can be a very effective vehicle for communicating with the public. However this is not always the way things work, particularly where meningitis occurs in a university. Alarmist reports have previously sensationalised the situation resulting in a huge pressure on universities to take widespread action which may not necessarily be the most effective clinically indicated.

It is important that university press officers work in collaboration with the press officers from hospitals and health departments to avoid the release of conflicting statements to the public as this could lead to unnecessary confusion and anxiety. Few universities reported clinical involvement but it is vital that accurate symptoms are reported by the press in order that the general public can be kept well informed of the situation. It would be a good idea to have one spokesperson nominated to speak to the press on behalf of all

organisations involved as this could avoid any conflicts in an emergency situation.

Having conducted this survey it is evident that the current level of preparation for dealing with meningitis within universities varies widely. It is vital that all higher education institutions increase both the levels of meningitis awareness and are well prepared to deal with any cases in future. In order to do this it will be necessary to have clear protocols and comprehensive chains of notification in place. The CVCP guidelines should be viewed by all universities and could provide a most useful base on which to build their own protocols adapted to the individual requirements of the institution. It is only by taking such measures and working towards a higher standard of preparation within our universities that meningitis can be dealt with more effectively in future.

Acknowledgements

Thanks must go to Dr John Powell, Aberdeen University Regent for his comment on early drafts of the questionnaire. A big thank-you must also go to the Scottish branch of AMOSSHE for their help and support of my work so far. The work was completed as part of an MSc. in Health Services and Public Health Research at the University of Aberdeen for which Jane Mackinnon was supported by a Medical Research Council Advanced Course Studentship.

References

1. CDSC. Meningococcal disease in England and Wales: 1995. *Commun Dis Rep CDR Wkly* 1997; 7 (R4):R55-59.
2. CDSC. Changing patterns of case ascertainment and trends in meningococcal disease in England and Wales. *Commun Dis Rep CDR Wkly* 1997;7(R4):R49-54.
3. Riordan F A I, Marzouk O, Thomson A P J, Sills J A, Hart C A. The changing presentations of meningococcal disease. *European Journal of Pediatrics* 1995;154:472-474.
4. King's European Meningitis Surveillance Unit. Surveillance of Bacterial Meningitis in Europe 1996; October 1997.
5. Grampian Health Board. The Management of Meningitis. Department of Public Health Medicine. 1996:1-7.
6. CDSC. Control of meningococcal disease: guidance for consultants in communicable disease control. *Commun Dis Rep CDR Wkly* 1995;5(13):R189-R195.
7. University of Southampton. Meningitis: Protecting our Students. Conference, Royal College of Physicians. London; Tuesday 9th June 1998.
8. CVCP. Managing meningitis in higher education institutions. London 1998;CVCP.

A Week in the Life of a Head of Student Services during a Meningitis Incident

Sheilagh Gunston, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Monday 20th October 1997

I received a very curious message from the Senior Chaplain at Cardiff University. He has received a message from a priest in Kent saying that Mr Smith was on his way to Cardiff to see his son John who has meningitis – Did this mean anything to me? He would check if it was one of their students (Cardiff University also known as University of Wales Cardiff – UWC) and I would check if he was ours (University of Wales Institute, Cardiff – UWIC). I rang our registry who confirmed John was indeed “one of ours”. I arranged for the Registrar and Directorate to be informed and rang the Chaplain at Cardiff University to update him. He was willing to assist in any way he could. My colleague the Dean of Students at Cardiff University also rang for an update and to offer support. Meanwhile the quest for information was well underway: where did John live? Was he hospitalised? Did he live in Halls of Residence? Our Accommodation Officer confirmed that John was not a campus resident and Registry found his lodgings address. The Public Health Department knew nothing of a meningitis case but I exchanged home phone numbers with the Consultant at their Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre. The Principal, evening nursing Sister and our Medical Officer’s practice were duly briefed and by 5.20pm all was quiet..

Tuesday 21st October 1997

I updated the Student Services reception staff and three of the four nurses at our four campuses. I was rather puzzled that I could not get hold of the nurse at the campus where John was studying...then the penny dropped! She was away at a conference...on meningitis! I saw our chaplain who has been given a phone number for John’s parents and we decided that he would make further enquiries. The Public Health Department were still in the dark so as yet John was still an unconfirmed rumour. The Dean of John’s faculty was informed of the situation and we awaited further news. Our Chaplain returned late morning having visited John. He had been admitted to hospital on the Sunday night, delirious with a high temperature. He had been given a lumbar puncture and was awaiting a result. The Public Health Department had not yet been

informed but John’s flatmates had been advised of the situation. Both of John’s parents were down to see him; his temperature was down and he was no longer delirious. The Public Health Department and Principal were updated. That afternoon I received a message from the Health Authority confirming that our student did have meningitis. The student was admitted to hospital on Sunday with suspected viral meningitis but initial tests proved negative. The blood culture sample however had now proved positive. The Communicable Disease team had already advised and treated close contacts. It was not felt that our other students were at risk but it was thought wise to inform fellow course students of the situation. A letter was put together and delivered to the campus along with relevant leaflets and posters. Within an hour of confirmation one of the nurses received a query from a lecturer at another campus (4 ½ miles away) – Did we have a case of meningitis? The Principal and I made the decision to email the University with the current situation rather than leave things to the mercy of the powerful rumour machinery. Bearing in mind the power (and potential damage!) of the media we liaised with External Affairs and agreed a press release. Ended the day with briefings, faxes and emails to colleagues, Public Health Authority and Cardiff University.

Wednesday 22nd October

Started the day with debriefings all round but no news so far. The media enquiries then started. BBC and local newspapers both wanted information. Both were told about what had happened and what we had done but no identifying information was given. This was followed by a chain of messages throughout the University to update and ensure that no-one reveals student’s identity. Our Chaplain had a further update from John and family – Not unduly concerned about media but John was worried about falling behind with his studies! The Chaplain agreed to see John’s tutor on his behalf. We were all beginning to breathe more easily when we got a phone call from Public Health Department regarding a second case! Carl Jones was admitted to hospital on Monday morning with head injuries. He was detained due to headache and vomiting, then developed a fever. A lumbar

puncture proved positive. Although both students were at the same campus they did not know each other and had no common social history. Public Health decided to call a meeting of the Outbreak Control Team (OCT) and I agreed to attend. The Principal was in London for the day but we maintained contact via mobile phone and agreed to honest responses to enquiries about this latest development with no fresh publicity until after the meeting. I then received a visit from the nurse from John's and Carl's campus. She was on a leave day following Tuesday's conference so I was very intrigued to her source of knowledge. I learnt that she had been told of the incident at the conference in Birmingham! The tenuous joint enquiries of Cardiff University and ourselves of Monday night were known by a fellow delegate! Another useful lesson in the power and uncontainability of our speculation! Our Students' Union President who had also been at the conference checked in for an update as well. He was also brimming with ideas as a result of the conference. We decided it would be appropriate for Students' Union President and myself to attend the OCT meeting and feedback to the Principal. The OCT meeting was a very helpful progress report and planning opportunity. Immunisation was not appropriate as it is only effective against group C infection and both our cases were B. Close contacts had already been treated by antibiotic prophylaxis and further medication was not practical due to no identifiable target group at risk. I also learnt that widespread antibiotic use "could lead to eradication of protective strains, re-colonisation with virulent strains and risk of allergic reactions to the antibiotic". Useful information for any anxious students or parents demanding treatment "just in case"! GPs and hospitals had already been alerted by the Health Authority so publicity could break at any time. It was decided that information needed to be made freely available and as soon as possible! Our Students' Union President bravely undertook the task of a leaflet, poster and information blitz on four teaching campuses, three sets of residencies and a target of over 7,000 students! I would brief staff and look into setting up an information "helpline". We returned to the University at 6.00pm and collated information for publicity campaign. Our President was well supported by membership of the University Students' Union and colleagues from National Union of Students Wales and Cardiff University. Briefing with Students' Union President, Principal and myself took place re: publicity and a decision to take part in press conference the following day.

Thursday 23rd October 1997

By 8.45 the Principal had negotiated a helpline with our IT Services department. The public number would "hunt" from our nursing staff at our Student Services base; to our main reception and then to staff such as chaplain, counsellor and welfare adviser. Our nurses at the other campuses could field internal enquiries. Student Services staff were briefed on helpline procedures and the Principal emailed staff and students on our latest position. He then rang the helpline to ensure the number was viable and received a perfect response from one of our welfare advisers. The Principal, Students' Union President and I then attended a press conference. This was chaired and organised by the Health Authority's P.R. officer and the speakers were himself, the Consultant from the Communicable Disease Team, our Principal and the Students' Union President. All went well and various TV, radio and press interviews followed (with the consultant in particular demand for Welsh language news services as he was the only Welsh speaker on the panel!), I took the opportunity to liaise with my colleague the Dean of Students at Cardiff University, as well as Cardiff University's Students' Union and NUS Wales. We returned to the University and I briefed the Nursery and returned to Student Services. We received a steady stream of enquiries and continued to brief various colleagues. At 4.00pm I debriefed with the Principal and he advised that the helpline be run until 6.00pm. This would give the numbers of National Meningitis Trust and the Meningitis Research Foundation as well as Cardiff University's Nightline. Meanwhile our Students' Union President and his trusty band had continued to inundate all campuses with information. He approved answerphone messages and liaised with wardens and halls managers for overnight continuity. At the end of the working day I was informed of a steady stream of enquiries; mainly parents of students and several parents of Cardiff University students as well. This was unsurprising, as we had had a number of enquiries from parents of both our students and Cardiff University after Cardiff University's meningitis cases. Parents (and sometimes students!) get mixed up about the names of both universities and are unsure of risk factors. We had, for example, a query about whether it was safe to shop in Cardiff! At 6.00pm I set up an answerphone, tested and discovered it was not working! This was despite an earlier check in the afternoon. The Principal and I went through possible options and decided to divert calls to himself overnight. This was successfully achieved. I watched the news

avidly that evening. The press conference and ensuing interviews were very impressive. I was most amused by the TV interviewer's apparent attempt to find worried ill-informed students on our campuses! Our students were wonderful! Yes, it was worrying but they had plenty of information...

Friday 24th October 1997

Quick debriefing with Principal – Several calls the previous evening but easily handled by himself and his wife. By midday queries were a steady trickle, mainly from parents. Our students made a few direct enquiries to campus nurses or others; the information blitz was obviously continuing to be effective. In light of this it was decided that an overnight answerphone message be left on the helpline number (by now we had organised a replacement answerphone!). We decided to give the two meningitis charity numbers and the Principal's, President's and my home numbers for more specific enquiries.

At 4.00pm we learnt of a suspected case of meningitis at Cardiff University. They had already circulated information from their Medical Officer and from the Communicable Disease Team.

That evening we had several enquiries before 8.00pm; mainly parents. A very quiet weekend followed much to our relief.

Monday 27th October 1997

Once again debriefings all round! We got an update on John and Carl. Both doing well and John was hoping to be discharged after the ward round. We were informed that although John and Carl both had type B infections they were different strains so there was no link. We had no further cases so started to breathe more easily.....

Afterward

We had no further cases and discontinued the helpline after a further week. Our close contact with Cardiff University continues for several reasons. People muddle the

two Universities so we are likely to receive calls about each other. There are possibilities of both sets of students mingling. The Dean of Students at Cardiff University and I have a good working relationship and find the support of each other's departments very helpful. Similarly the Cardiff University Students' Union, UWIC Students' Union and NUS Wales have developed expertise and good working relations in this area.

The team work between Directorate, Students' Union and Student Services was invaluable. The combination of skills, authority, access to willing hands and various areas of expertise and experience worked well in the division of labour.

This particular response was based on the fact that we had two possible cases at the same time. We also had to bear in mind the public concern and media interest in Cardiff due to the previous outbreak at Cardiff University. An earlier case was handled internally with appropriate information given to classmates, Student Services and Directorate only. There seems to be a delicate balance between under and over reaction. We have to remember that there are between 2,000 and 3,000 cases a year within the UK. Although under fives are most at risk our under 25s are the second most vulnerable group and halls of residence have ideal conditions for the spread of bacterial meningitis. Most universities are likely to get a couple of cases a year and experience would bear this out. It is therefore, unrealistic to set up such elaborate systems for dealing with every case. Never-the-less the consequences of untreated bacterial meningitis are life threatening and we are all tragically aware of such cases. Raised awareness of signs and symptoms must form the backbone of any university or college's guidelines when dealing with this illness.

This has, of course, now been thoroughly thought through and is an essential part of the CVCP guidelines: managing meningitis in higher education institutions. The guidelines are a welcome innovation which were unavailable at the time of this incident.

Word Processing

by Rachael Archibald, Department of Student Services

Designed, Printed and Published

by the Department of External Relations

at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle

for the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education