

Bear in mind too that most "committee" people enjoy a good argument. The meetings provide a chance for them to show off their eloquence or display how doggedly determined they can be if they choose. For some the fierce discussion in an argumentative committee meeting is like a tough game of squash—it allows them to let off steam at the end of a hard week. So you may find yourself wondering, as a meeting drags on, whether there is a real disagreement over the issues or whether people are simply enjoying the repartee. A skilful chairman, though not wishing to deprive members of their fun, will curtail unnecessarily protracted banter, so that there is sufficient time for all the items. The discussion of a controversial subject needs strategic placing on the agenda. If it is kept towards the end, when people are itching to get off home, then unnecessary discussion will be kept to a minimum. Alternatively, it has been suggested to me that at the start of a meeting, if antagonistic members are late, the contentious issue should be quickly rushed through, but I do not think I could recommend such devious manoeuvres.

It sometimes happens that despite your best efforts the committee does reach an impasse; the discussion goes round in circles and no agreement can be reached. If you think that voting would not help for the reasons set out above, it may be worth while simply postponing the decision so that people have a chance to cool down. To my amazement I sometimes found that within a couple of days after the most heated debate the participants would have forgotten exactly what it was they had been so vehemently fighting for; it would not then be hard to get agreement.

Delegation and motivation

The ability to delegate is one of the most crucial skills for any management role. Unfortunately it can also be one of the most difficult. Done well and the job becomes a pleasure, but done poorly and you simply create extra work for yourself. One often hears it said that if you want something doing properly, it is no good asking others, you have to do it yourself. This, I believe, is due to a lack of understanding about what makes good delegation. It is not fair simply to expect others to do the boring aspects of a task, which you cannot be bothered to do yourself; with little interest in it, they will not care how well it is done or whether it is completed on time. Good delegation means that people are encouraged to take upon themselves things that they will be good at and will enjoy. It is important that you entrust them with the task in hand. How they go about it is up to them, and, though you might have a chat before they begin, interference from you should be minimal. This is what can make delegation so hard. It inevitably means your handing over control of the project, and, even if things are not being done how you would have liked or up to your meticulous standards, you must resist the destructive temptation to interfere, otherwise you may well end up being told to do it yourself.

One role of the president that is not often realised is that of "motivator." To get the best out of your team you must ensure that they feel appreciated and, very importantly, that they are actually enjoying being on the committee. It is surprising how effective home-made chocolate cake can be in encouraging people to attend meetings on time. And even for the tasks which have been given over to others, an encouraging 'phone call will never go amiss. Similarly, the odd box of

chocolates or bunch of flowers to say thanks for doing a good job is money well spent.

Tactical manoeuvres

With the committee up and running what other advice is there to ensure a smooth year in office for the first timer? On many occasions simple, seemingly small, requests will be made of you: Can we borrow the disco equipment? Can the rugby club buy a new set of shirts? Can we have £300 for new computer software? Some people have a knack of catching you at inopportune moments, but the temptation to give an answer there and then should be avoided, especially if the answer would be no. Most people do not like being turned down, and in such circumstances "the diplomatic delay" is called for. You proclaim that the suggestion, however bizarre or outrageous, seems to be eminently reasonable but will have to be thought about and discussed by the committee. This takes the heat off. Then two weeks later, the committee having given it full consideration, the request is regretfully turned down. For some reason people find this procedure more acceptable than a straightforward "no" first time round.

"Administrative ping-pong" is another manoeuvre to take the pressure off. It is brought into play when you are being pressed for something, such as a report, which you intend dealing with eventually but not with the speed requested. To stall for time you request further information or another document or a different report, anything in fact, to put the ball back in the other party's court so that they think that the delay is now down to them rather than you. Those who have ever tried to claim housing benefit or rent rebate will appreciate that this technique is performed par excellence by the Department of Social Services. You may feel that this is all rather a waste of time; however, for those occasions when it is not politic to inform the others that they will simply have to wait, the illusion that you are getting on with the job may prove rather useful.

Conclusion

During such a year in office life will often be hectic, and at times the workload may seem overwhelming; no doubt your medical work suffers too. However, with a good team the commitment should also be enjoyable, and I would recommend anyone given a similar opportunity to take it up: the education received will be tremendous.

Useful reading

Whitfield AGW. Chair a committee. In: *How to do it*. 2nd ed. London: BMJ, 1987:43-5.

Jay A. *Management and Machiavelli*. London: Bantam, 1974.

Correction

ABC of Major Trauma

Head injuries—II

An editorial error occurred in this article by Mr Ross Bullock and Professor Graham Teasdale (16 June, p 1576). The histogram at the bottom of p 1576 shows the absolute risk of intracranial haematoma in patients with head injury and not the absolute risk of death as published.