

Balint Society of Australia
President's Report
Marion Lustig
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I'm delighted to be presenting the first annual President's Report for the Balint Society of Australia.

The Society was formed in August, 2005, and incorporated in the state of Victoria in September. It developed out of a Balint interest group which had been meeting since the middle of 2002, and then a steering committee established in 2004. We now have 34 members who include people from each state, mostly either GPs or psychotherapists.

I'm going to start with a brief summary of our aims, our structure and our achievements so far. Then I want to say a few words about how I see our current priorities and future directions.

Aims

Our Society is named in acknowledgement of the Hungarian born psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Michael Balint, who developed a unique method for studying and teaching about the doctor-patient relationship in London in the 1950's. Quoting from our constitution, our primary purpose is "to promote and advance research, studies and training in the psychological aspects of health care and, in particular, general practice, with special reference to the doctor-patient relationship, and to disseminate this knowledge beyond the Society for improvement of health care of the public at large." Our constitution outlines some of the ways in which we further our aims.

I think I can speak for many of our members when I say that we think Balint groups have a unique and valuable contribution to make to general practice education, and that there is much scope for developing Balint work in Australia.

Structure

Our Committee of Management, currently based in Melbourne, and usually meeting at my home/rooms in Caulfield North, currently consists of 7 hard-working members. We have met approximately monthly, with lots of work done by committee members between meetings. Apart from myself, they are John Barton as Vice-President, Larry Osborne as Secretary, Ruth Dunn as Treasurer, and ordinary members Bill Betts, Ann-Marie Diggins and Mike Hampton. Three former members who are no longer on the committee are Lynette Chazan, Laurie Lovell-Symons (by teleconference from Sydney) and Kate Strasser.

Achievements

Many of these have occurred in continuity with efforts made by members of the Balint Interest Group and the Steering Committee before the formation of the Society, and in the interests of documenting our history, this first report will refer to some of these achievements as well.

The first of our achievements has been continuing and/or starting new Balint groups. In Melbourne, there are now 5 groups led by our members, which have been running for up to 6 years, plus a new one about to start (we know of a couple of other groups in Melbourne); and there was a pilot group for GP registrars in 2003

In Sydney, an pre-existing peer group has been run as a Balint group during the last few months. In both Brisbane and Hobart, new groups started earlier this year. The people leading these groups include psychotherapists, mainly with a psychoanalytic approach, and GPs. The leaders have received support &/or supervision from both Australian and overseas people. In Melbourne there is also a leaders' peer group and a reading group led by Emeritus Professor Graeme Smith, both operating since 2004.

We have organized two well attended public scientific meetings in Melbourne, both with very experienced Balint leaders from overseas, Henry Jablonski from Sweden (2004) and Albert Lichtenstein from the U.S.A. (2005). We have been grateful to have been able to rent very suitable premises belonging to the Victorian Association of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists for these meetings. We have further meetings scheduled later this year in both Melbourne and Sydney with German visitors Heide Otten and Ernst Petzold.

In 2005 we ran a four session Balint workshop, as well as a Balint leadership workshop, at the annual RACGP scientific meeting in Darwin, with the involvement of both Australian Balint leaders and overseas visitors Albert Lichtenstein from the U.S.A. and John Salinsky from the U.K. This was a follow-up to the successful workshop held at the RACGP meeting in Melbourne in 2004 with visitor Amy Ellwood from the U.S.A. We have been invited to offer similar workshops at this year's meeting in Brisbane. In May, 2006 we ran a Balint workshop for the first time at the GPCE meeting in Sydney. John Barton has run two Balint workshops for GPs in New Zealand, in 2005 and 2006. We have gradually increased the leader training aspects of our workshops, so that they become opportunities for leader professional development as well as being an intensive introduction to and/or experience of Balint groups for GPs. Feedback from all these workshops has been overwhelmingly positive, with participants strongly valuing the experience in itself, and some expressing interest in ongoing Balint groups. These workshops have been important in fostering relationships among our members on a national level.

Six of our members have now attended American Balint Leadership Intensives, including myself on two occasions. Most of us have greatly valued these workshops which offer a very hands on learning experience focused on Balint group leadership. They include participants with varying experience of leading groups, from novices to the very experienced. They are not intended to be a stand-alone training, but an intensive professional development opportunity. We are exploring the possibility of having a similar workshop in Australia, with faculty including overseas visitors.

We have been providing an Email newsletter, called Balint Bulletin, since 2002, with 7 editions having been produced, and have gradually accumulated a mailing list of over 100

people which includes the mental health co-ordinators of all Divisions of General Practice.

We have established contact people for the Society in each state, for those interested in joining, starting or leading groups. New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia have each formed steering groups to facilitate the development of Balint work in their respective states. There are members working on doing Balint work through teleconference/videoconference for isolated and rural GPs.

We are well on the way to developing a website which will include educational material about Balint groups, contact information for the Society and for state liaison people, and links to other Balint websites.

I have published articles about Balint work in the Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy (2003), The Primary Mental Health Care Australian Resource Centre (2003 and 2005), the Balint Journal (U.K.) (2004), the Australian College of Psychological Medicine newsletter (2005), and have an article in press for Australian Family Physician. Jill Benson and Karen McGraith published an article in Australian Family Physician in 2004. There were interviews with Bill Betts (2005) and Sally Manuell (2006) in Australian Doctor. Jan Orman published an article in the Australian College of Psychological Medicine newsletter last year.

I have spoken about Balint work at the following conferences/meetings: Psychiatric Aspects of Shared Care, Melbourne (2001), General Practice Divisions of Victoria, Victoria Mental Health Network, Melbourne (2002), Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia, Geelong (2003), Deakin University Masters in Psychoanalytic Studies (2006), Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia, Brisbane (2006) and will be presenting at the RANZCP Psychotherapy Section Conference, Sydney later this year. Larry Osborne and I co-presented at the 4th National Doctors' Health Conference, Melbourne (2005).

Other ways in which we have publicized our work have included the RACGP's Friday Fax and the RANZCP newsletter.

Leonie Sullivan and I are working on a project to compile a comprehensive database of Balint groups literature, as well as a literature review about the effectiveness of Balint groups. Another project of mine to survey current Balint groups in Australia has been suspended for the time being, following several unsuccessful attempts to secure funding and re-thinking the project.

We have continuing input into the Peer Support Project initiated by the Victorian Faculty of the RACGP including their booklet "Keeping the Doctor Alive".

We have strong links with the International Balint Federation and have been sending them reports about our activities since 2003. I attended the IBF biennial Congress in Berlin in 2003 and intend to do so again in Portugal in 2007, together with Ruth Dunn.

We intend to formally affiliate with the IBF during the next few months. We have received a great deal of support from our colleagues, particularly in Europe and North America, ranging from correspondence and phone calls, through participation in the American Balint Society Email discussion forum, to people being willing to pay their own way to Australia to help and inspire us.

Current priorities and future directions

1. Structure and member involvement.

We are at a stage of our development where the workload is no longer able to be carried by the Committee of Management. We are therefore hoping that other members will be interested in being involved in the running of the Society, by joining the Committee of Management, or joining sub-committees or working groups, or by taking on tasks as individuals. Increasing the number of members will hopefully increase our pool of energy and talent, as well as providing us with more money to pay for some of our activities.

2. Balint leader development.

Eventually, we will need to move towards formal leader accreditation. My view is that we are not ready to implement formal requirements yet. At this stage, I think we need to be encouraging and inclusive rather than prescriptive. We should be stressing the value of experience as a Balint group participant, appropriate reading, attending Balint workshops including leadership workshops, supervision and co-leading with experienced leaders, and we need to be providing as many of these opportunities as we can. Leaders from varied professional backgrounds have somewhat different needs in terms of leader training and we need to be thoughtful about this.

3. National relationships.

Although the Society's Committee of Management is based in Melbourne, and at this stage our organization is incorporated only in Victoria, we are a national organization. I think it fair to say that Balint work is most developed in Melbourne. The national network of state contact people is an important aspect of our efforts to facilitate further developments elsewhere. It is gratifying that other states have initiated local steering committees. Balint workshops are an important avenue for collaboration between members on a national level, and hopefully the website will be in the future.

4. Publicity, education and research.

Our experience has often been that it is difficult to interest enough GPs in this work to get ongoing groups started, although they usually remain involved once they do join a group. Would-be leaders currently outnumber GPs looking for groups. We need to continue to think about how to address this issue. As well as such avenues as the website, articles, conference presentations and conference workshops, through which we should be including information about research identifying the specific benefits of Balint groups compared to other educational activities, I would like to encourage our members to undertake their own such research.

5. Activities to be continued.

These include: Balint Bulletin, RACGP annual conference workshops; website; scientific meetings (aiming for 2 per year); leader supervision; liaison with Peer Support Project, ACPM, overseas Balint Societies and IBF; and literature compilation and review projects.

6. New initiatives.

We are considering organizing a stand-alone Balint conference, with or without leadership training as a component.

We are hoping to develop Balint work via teleconference.

We are hoping to produce a brochure.

Thanks

Many people, both members and non-members, have contributed to this Society, and I want to name a few specifically.

Stan Gold – for support and encouragement in the early stages.

David Clarke – for organizing short-term Balint groups which inspired many of the current ongoing groups in Melbourne.

Larry Osborne – for energy and enthusiasm and keeping me on track in meetings; for talking me into convening the initial steering group; and for providing invaluable knowledge about groups and organizations.

All the members of the steering committee which formed this Society: apart from myself, they were Larry Osborne, Bill Betts, Lynette Chazan, and John Barton.

Sam Heard – for making Balint workshops a regular part of RACGP national conferences, for helping get the website started, and for being our NT contact.

John Barton – for enthusiastically taking up an enormous workload in co-ordinating our most recent workshops; for taking Balint work to New Zealand; for liaison with the Australian College of Psychological Medicine; and for always providing a shoulder to cry on and sage advice.

Ruth Dunn – for encouragement, unfailing good humour and not being afraid of figures.

Bill Betts and Lynette Chazan – for thoughtful contributions to the COM and liaison with the Peer Support Project.

Ann-Marie Diggins – for taking on the selfless task of keeping our Email mailing list up to date.

Mike Hampton – for valiantly taking on technology and getting our website project started.

Laurie Lovell-Symons – for convening an energetic committee in Sydney and for putting up with the vagaries of technology in being on the COM via Skype.

Leonie Sullivan – for enthusiasm and support, boundless energy in collecting articles, and imagination and commitment in thinking up novel ways to deliver Balint.

Penny Love – for convening a committee in Brisbane, for encouragement and support, for working on the forthcoming Brisbane RACGP workshop.

Wendy Lyn-Wolman and Jill Benson, for being state contact people in W.A. and S.A. respectively.

Kerri Boase-Jelinek – for undertaking to take over responsibility for the website, and for sharing her knowledge about research.

Amy Ellwood, Henry Jablonski, Albert Lichtenstein, John Salinsky, Heide Otten and Ernst Petzold – for making the long trip to Australia to help us.

Many other members of the American Balint Society, the Balint Society (U.K.) and the International Balint Federation- for encouragement, support, correspondence, training, inspiration and collegiality.

All Australian Balint group leaders who have given of their time and energy (and often with no remuneration) to lead or co-lead Balint workshops and/or Balint groups in recent years: Sam Heard, Bill Betts, Ruth Dunn, Laurie Lovell-Symons, Penny Love, Alexa Gilbert-Obrart, Mary Cameron, Tom Wilmot, Jyotsna Field, Kate Strasser, Lynette Chazan, Frank Meumann, Steven Pincus, Leonie Sullivan, John Coleman, Bill Orchard, John Barton.

Finally, I want to share with you something from a recent conversation I had with Frank Dornfest, a former IBF President, and founding President of the American Balint Society. He said that in countries in which Balint Societies had been successful, there had been several common ingredients: a group of committed people with personal involvement; a sense of being a movement; and a relatively safe container. An addition, there was often a strong sense that Balint work offered something otherwise missing in general practice education; and a feeling of being somewhat counter-cultural. I think that if we interpret the last bit as meaning running somewhat counter to prevailing GP culture, we have all the ingredients for a very successful Balint Society in Australia.