

**March 2023**

**The life and times of a GP practising in Wooler**

**Speaker: Dr Noel Roy**

An outstanding number of members and visitors came to hear this extremely popular retired local doctor's talk, which was to span his long medical career.

Dr Roy began his talk with his training in the 50s at King's College, from which he graduated in 1959. He explained that at that time women were allowed to take up only 20% of the places at Medical School. He amused his audience by telling us that students had to have a microscope and a half-skeleton. The students' first 18 months were spent in the school, before they saw patients.

When he began his training on the wards, a nurse was required to carry a hot water bottle, since "no self-respecting doctor would examine a patient's abdomen without first warming his hands". Six-month stints in various specialities followed. Operations were carried out swiftly, with two trainee doctor assistants. In Casualty, doctors worked night and day. Nurses taught them how to apply plasters. When it was the turn of midwifery, they were provided with bicycles as half the births were at home. Dr Roy's first job was as a houseman in London. There were no shifts, just every other weekend off. But the nurses were kind, and meals were free.

Ultimately Dr Roy knew he wanted to go into General Practice. As a qualified doctor, he worked with a Polish GP, in conditions which by today's standards seem primitive, such as patients sitting in a deck chair which could be raised or lowered for the doctor's examination.

Dr Roy spent two years doing National Service, during which he married. Subsequently he began his GP work a very rural part of County Durham. Dr Roy regaled his audience with stories of long hours, little relief, dependence on wives acting as unpaid receptionists, and only the most basic equipment. Snowed-up roads and a lack of telephones compounded the difficulties.

In 1963 Dr Roy came to Wooler. He described his colleagues, dedicated and hardworking men who supported him as he gained experience. He often did his own dispensing and was regularly on call day and night. Local hospitals, to which patients were referred with handwritten letters, dealt with a whole raft of problems, leaving only the most serious cases to go to the RVI in Newcastle.

At the beginning of his career, patients were private: 1s 9d for a surgery visit, 2s 3d for a home visit and medication. The NHS brought in free health care, but patients were still treated on the spot: doctors set bones and made diagnoses. They had antibiotics, morphine, gas and air, pethadine and ether.

All in all, Dr Roy conveyed to his audience that the work of a GP was extremely hard, yet he was able to take pleasure in the foibles and strengths of his colleagues, and it was apparent that his life as a doctor must have been immensely successful.