Minutes: Meeting of August 10, 1998

Present:
Drs. Kenneth Dorshkind, Thomas Drake, Ronald Edelstein, Dohn Glitz, Theodore Hall, Theodore Miller, Neil Parker, Alan Robinson, Stuart Slavin (Co-Chair), Michael Stemmerman, Ronald Tompkins, John Tormey (Co-Chair), Richard Usatine, LuAnn Wilkerson and Michael Wilkes.

Student: Andrew Watson

Guests: Drs. Jennifer Firestone and Earl Homsher, and Charlotte Myers.

Cell and Tissue Biology Course

In 1995 Biological Chemistry and Physiology attempted to join forces with the Microscopic Anatomy faculty to devise a new course that called Cell and Tissue Biology. The goal of achieving better balance of the workload over the first year was successful. However, integration within Cell and Tissue Biology was unsuccessful. In 1996, Cell and Tissue Biology was taught as two sub-courses, "Microscopic Anatomy" and "Topics in Physiology and Biochemistry". This was an improvement but the material still did not coordinate well. In 1997, each course ran better but was essentially independent of the other.

The course chairs involved have agreed that the name Cell and Tissue Biology should be dropped. One course is renamed "Microscopic Anatomy and Cell Biology". "Topics" is renamed "Molecular and Membrane Biology" to better describe its content.

It was moved and seconded to approve the course changes and the name change. The motion was passed by a unanimous vote.

FEC Response to the Core Clerkships Task Force Report

The FEC approved the Core Clerkship proposal, but noted concerns such as:

- How will the integration of Psychiatry and Neurology be achieved?
- How will a combined Internal Medicine and Family Medicine outpatient experience be accomplished?
- How will Obstetrics & Gynecology and Pediatrics integrate neonatology?
- How will the "threads" work, e.g., Women’s Health? Threads will need oversight and "champions" within the development groups.
- How will Surgery assure that its subspecialties are taught in a generalist way?
- The Task Force wants the core clerkship curriculum to offer students what every physician should know, but that body of knowledge has yet to be defined.

The FEC approved the proposal in concept, but requested an update on these issues to be presented by the end of this year. It is possible that some component of this proposal could be piloted early, but the goal is to implement by the year 2000. This will be a very complex implementation, especially in the transition year.
Dr. Tormey stated that small working groups of the faculty concerned would be charged to work though these issues and report to the MEC before the end of the year.

**Human Biology and Disease Task Force Report, Dr. Earl Homsher**

The final written report of the Task Force was distributed (attached). Dr. Homsher highlighted certain of its aspects.

The Task Force consisted of 16 faculty members. Thirteen members voted in support of the Task Force report and recommendations. Two other members attended only a few meetings. There were no nays.

After a thorough review of the current curriculum, members of the Task Force generated several draft proposals. Each was based on the curricular framework developed by the previous Curriculum Structure Task Force. These were merged into the final proposal for structure and contents of the blocks as presented here to the MEC.

Several important issues were left unresolved by the Task Force, and additional ones were raised at the meeting.

- The Task Force did not reach consensus on pedagogical issues such as limiting lecture hours, the amount of time that should be left unstructured, and the extent to which problem-based learning should be employed.

  Dr. Wilkerson objected that these issues were part of the charge of the Task Force and should have been considered as an extension of the principles laid down by the previous Curriculum Structure Task Force. Dr. Tormey expressed doubt that this was part of the charge. These issues were not dwelt on to facilitate consensus building on the issues around block contents and structure. Dr. Wilkerson suggested that the Homsher report be reviewed in light of the previous accepted pedagogical principles before final approval. It was agreed that this would be done at the next meeting.

- Concerns were expressed that the proposal did not include adequate provision for insuring the longitudinal integration of certain important topics or "threads" from one block to the next. Planning must be undertaken by a group of colleagues reaching consensus on content, duration, etc.

  Dr. Wilkes expressed particular concern that the report contains inadequate provisions for insuring the continued existence of Doctoring or a Doctoring-like curriculum. Doctoring needs to be separate in some ways, e.g., a distinct administrative structure because of the off-campus preceptors. However, integration of exams and coordination of topics are possible. Clinical training that integrates with the overall curriculum will be very useful as students apply that body of knowledge to clinical situations. Care will have to be taken that subjects are not fragmented in order to integrate across disciplines.
It was agreed that the report was not sufficiently explicit in this area. Dr. Wilkes was invited to consult with his colleagues and to present additional language that would clarify how Doctoring would fit into the proposed new curriculum.

- The Task Force did not reach consensus on how the block courses should be developed, administered, and integrated with each other. Time did not permit discussion of this issue.

Discussion of the Task Force Report was stopped in order to allow time for consideration of Letters of Distinction (below). It was agreed that the Report would be taken up at the next MEC meeting, where the three bulleted items would be discussed in greater detail.

**Letters of Distinction**

Dr. Tormey provided a summary of the history of Letters of Distinction (attached). "Only truly remarkable" is by definition a very small number; there are no minimum or maximum numbers. The 1998 LCME site visit team reacted to the fact that there is no consistency in the policy across courses. The LCME required that (1) rules for Letters of Distinction be defined and regularized and (2) that the requirements be communicated to students. The FEC began a review of grades in June in which students showed enthusiasm for P/F grading but had concerns about Letters of Distinction.

The 1st and 2nd Year Subcommittees on Curricular Planning arrived at different conclusions about the use of LOD in the basic science courses. The intent of the FEC had been that just a few students would indeed earn Letters of Distinction, according to past FEC Chairman, Dr. Leonard Rome (otherwise, it would be just a back door to a letter-graded system).

Dr. Slavin reported that in a survey of fourth year students, preference between P/F vs H/P/F in years 3 and 4 was evenly divided. Letters of Distinction could create a hybrid honors grading system.

Drs. Stuber, Tormey, Slavin and Drake met to determine a consistent policy for the 1998-99 grading cycle, while the MEC and FEC undertake a more in-depth look at the total grading system. It had been agreed that simply increasing the number of Letters of Distinction was clearly not consistent with the initial intent and basing Letters of Distinction strictly on performance on an exam would be counterproductive. Overall, the recommendation for this year is to adhere to the original intent. All course chairs must be reminded to define the requirements for Letters of Distinction for their courses. Simultaneously, a serious debate of the patterns and issues will be undertaken. There are too many interpretations of "extraordinary," which is an inherent flaw. There was substantial debate as to whether there is currently less or more stress and competition under the P/F grading system with Letters of Distinction, how "extraordinary" should be defined and how to maintain consistency.
Dr. Wilkerson stated that clinical clerkships have been asked to define criteria for Letters of Distinction with explicit criteria that are better communicated to students than in the past.

An issue of concern is the quality of narrative evaluations from clerkships. These narratives are a critical component of Dean’s Letters. Their quality has caused some students of the faculty’s ability to give valid grades or identify "extraordinary." A contributor to this is that changes in the health care system have had a negative impact on faculty getting to know students well for evaluation and comment. There is too often a lack of correlation of comments to numerical evaluations. In the Focus Groups with fourth year students, it was evident that students did not trust faculty evaluations.

Andrew Watson (MSIV) suggested that the Letters of Distinction system benefits very few students and the benefits are outweighed by the time investment at many levels. There was agreement by some members that writing Letters of Distinction takes a great deal of time.

It was suggested that if a synthesized, summative statement cannot be prepared for each student, then the evaluation system should be changed.

**Motion:** It was moved to actively consider an Honors/Pass/Fail system for clerkships. This was seconded and approved (14 in favor; two opposed).

**Motion:** That the core clerkship chairs (for courses of four or more weeks’ duration) review past grading practices and, in discussion with the Clerkship Committee, develop a Letters of Distinction pattern targeting 5-10% for this 1998-99 year. The motion was seconded.

Discussion: Dr. Parker suggested that criteria can be developed by retrospectively reviewing grading practices and then target 5-10% for Letters of Distinction. The objection was raised that this then becomes a *de facto* Honors/Pass/Fail system. A counter argument was offered that this does not represent an H/P/F system because Letters of Distinction are not recorded on the transcript.

**The vote was called and was tied; the votes of the Committee Co-chairs did not break the tie.**

It was concluded that course chairs would be asked to adhere to the existing guidelines for Letters of Distinction, recognizing that the MEC and FEC may change these within the next few months. They may give Letters of Distinction to extraordinary students but are not required to do so. However, each course is expected to have explicit criteria and publicize these to their students.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:50 p.m.