Journal of

AoME

ACADEMY OF MEDICAL EDUCATORS

Volume 1
February to December 2026



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JAoME is an official journal of the Academy of Medical Educators. It is a diamond open access peer-reviewed journal freely available to readers worldwide, including developing nations. The journal welcomes papers on any aspect of health professions education and is dedicated to advancing the field of medical education through the dissemination of high-quality research, innovation, and scholarly discourse. Our mission is to support educators, researchers, and clinicians in shaping the future of medical education across undergraduate, postgraduate, and continuing professional development.

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Journal DOI
10.18573/ISSN. 2977-5981
Issue DOI
10.18573/jaome.v1

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

Cardiff University Press

The Journal of the Academy of Medical Educators

A history of the Academy of Medical Educators in five presidents

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doi.org/10.18573/jaome.77

Accepted for publication 30 October 2026

To cite this article

Browne J, **A history of the Academy of Medical Educators in five presidents** *The Journal of the Academy of Medical Educators.* 2026 1(1). doi.org/10.18573/jaome.77

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A history of the Academy of Medical Educators in five presidents

Julie Browne interviewed all the Academy's Presidents, past and present, to write this article celebrating 20 years of AoME. Their stories and reflections provide a fascinating insight into the growth and development of AoME over the last 20 years – and perhaps give some indications of where AoME may go in the next 20.

The decade following the publication of the Calman Report[1] and Tomorrow's Doctors 1993[2] saw significant advances in medical education. New approaches to clinical practice and improved educational research evidence were driving educational transformations. Modern integrated undergraduate and postgraduate curricula were replacing outdated teaching. New technology was transforming assessment and simulation. In the UK the General Medical Council's new quality assurance programme (the 'Quality Assurance of Basic Medical Education' - QABME) had its work cut out with five new medical schools and expanding student numbers. Modernising Medical Careers[3] brought further transformative change to the training landscape through the introduction of the Foundation Programme and streamlined specialty training pathways.

Yet at the same time, medical education careers had barely changed in decades. Medical education was still seen as something that all medical practitioners were expected to do, generally without training or recognition. It remained a 'Cinderella' academic field,[4] with relatively few university programmes and no entry-level career opportunities until the emergence of Clinical Teaching Fellowships in the 2000s.

By 2006, it was clear to many that the time was ripe for the creation of a new body to set standards for medical educators and to recognise individuals' skills, values and achievements. A small group of medical education leaders formed a working group chaired by Dame Lesley Southgate and Sir Kenneth Calman to kickstart the formation of a new professional organisation. The first elections were held in 2007, and John Bligh became the inaugural President of what came to be known as The Academy of Medical Educators (AoME).

2007–2011: John Bligh

AoME was never intended to be just another 'learned society' or interest group, but a professional organisation with the aim of promoting medical education careers and expertise in the clinical workplace. So, the most urgent task was to push forward AoME's unique contribution to the medical education community by developing both professional standards[5] and a recognition system through which full Membership and Fellowship could be instituted. This had to take place alongside a mass of administration to create an infrastructure for AoME: setting it up as a limited company with Articles of Association, registering it with the Charity Commission, creating standing orders for committees and working groups, and instituting reporting and accounting procedures.

AoME also had to establish a public face: a website was designed and launched, newsletters distributed, and the first annual AoME conferences took place in London, attracting large attendances. John recollects spending many hours on the 0600 train from Plymouth travelling the country, organising meetings and events and trying to raise interest and support for AoME within the medical education community. It was met in some quarters with scepticism and indifference; but there were many who agreed that a new professional organisation was an important step towards recognising medical education excellence and were excited to contribute. Once people understood what AoME was about, they flocked to join as foundation members. Grants started to come in from national bodies who also recognised the need to professionalise the medical education community.

To be able to communicate AoME's vision, John presided over many difficult internal and external conversations around the new organisation's values, aims, mission and objectives. These early decisions helped set the fundamental direction of AoME and continue to inform and drive its work 20 years later.

John's overriding aim was to get AoME firmly established as a functioning, independently solvent organisation. AoME had been 'lodging' in Peninsula Medical School but as it grew, it

was felt that it needed a London base if it was to cement its high-level influence. With a healthy bank balance and the promise of further grant moneys the decision was made to set up an office in London with a small professional staff.

2011–2014: Sean Hilton

When Sean Hilton stood for President, he could not have anticipated how challenging his presidency would become. Soon after his election, the decision to relocate the AoME office to London proved unsustainable. The move had depended on grant funding that was unexpectedly withdrawn following the 2010 general election, while major changes in medical education nationally created further uncertainty. Technical, communication and staffing difficulties compounded the situation, leaving AoME facing an existential threat. Sean and the Council were forced to make a series of rapid and difficult decisions, the most important of which was that AoME could not be allowed to fail.

AoME turned to the Association for the Study of Medical Education (ASME) for support and was offered temporary accommodation in its Edinburgh offices while the organisation regrouped. Files and servers were transferred to Scotland, where a part-time administrator maintained core operations. Sean's presidency therefore involved considerable practical effort: encouraging members and volunteers, making frequent trips to Edinburgh, managing paperwork from his kitchen table and using every available connection and opportunity to keep AoME functioning. Inevitably, many activities had to be scaled back or suspended, including the annual conference.

Despite these difficulties, AoME remained an influential voice in medical education. During Sean's presidency, the General Medical Council (GMC) introduced its Recognition of Trainers scheme, responding in part to growing professional pressure and AoME's own lobbying efforts. The seven-point framework developed by AoME[6] became the basis on which tens of thousands of doctors were recognised by their Deaneries. Once AoME's infrastructure had been rebuilt, many of these educators became Fellows of the Academy. In 2013 Good Medical Practice[7] identified competence in medical education as a core responsibility for all doctors, something which AoME had been pushing for since its inception.

Looking back, Sean regards his principal achievement as having kept AoME alive at a point when many believed its future was in doubt. Sean's optimism and determination paid off when an agreement was reached with Cardiff University to relocate the office to its Heath Park campus, where it remains today.

Reflecting on this turning point, Sean said:

> *"I felt that once that happened, the Academy would be okay."*

2014–2017: Derek Gallen

Derek had been one of the original team involved in setting up AoME and had been a council member since its inception. He was delighted at having facilitated the move to offices within the Wales Deanery. Much of the old AoME was still in place and working effectively but the priority was to ensure that the administration systems were overhauled and that the data we held were correct and up to date. This was a huge task, involving moving to a more efficient website provider and designing a new database and application system from scratch.

Derek, like his predecessors, took on the difficult and arduous role of advocating for AoME on the national stage. He laughs about how pushy he had to be, using every ounce of his influence as Chair of the Committee of Postgraduate Medical Deans (COPMED), Wales Postgraduate Dean and National Director of the UK Foundation Programme Office to set up meetings: "They had to listen to us; they had to talk to me." His efforts were rewarded as more organisations came on board, embedding the professional standards within their own educational processes, seeking to become corporate members and supporters of AoME, and inviting AoME speakers to their conferences and training events. Continuing conversations were held with the GMC and other senior bodies around the UK regarding

credentialling and recognising and developing trainer excellence.

During Derek's tenure as President, he was a driving force in setting up the DEMEC multi-organisation national conference,[8] which still takes place biennially with AoME as a major partner. Membership numbers recovered and started to increase significantly as new members and fellows sought to achieve AoME post-nominals. AoME began to widen its influence among jobbing clinical teachers thanks to monthly workshops and meetings around the country and the introduction of the course accreditation scheme (which allowed a 'fast track' to apply for membership). The AoME annual conferences had been paused, but were fully reinstated with turnout as high as ever.

2017–2023: Jacky Hayden

Jacky took over an organisation that has always been keen to broaden and extend its membership. During her tenure as President, the longest to date, particular emphasis was placed on improving representation among minority groups and on attracting and retaining members at earlier stages of their careers.

In 2020, AoME launched the Developing Medical Educators Group (DMEG) to support early-career medical educators. Over time it developed into a welcoming and supportive community, offering guidance, peer support and mentorship, while providing a space in which educators could explore their professional development and career options. With AoME's support, the first issue of The British Student Doctor Journal[9] was published by Cardiff University Press, written and edited entirely by medical students and resident doctors. Both initiatives have since gone from strength to strength.

The Academy continued to grow steadily and strengthen its position as an independent professional organisation. It launched the Course Accreditation Plus scheme in 2018, enabling graduates of courses meeting AoME's Standards to gain fast-track membership; and it continued its regular activities, holding meetings across the UK, recognising and supporting educators through recognition, prizes and awards, and engaging in research and scholarship to inform policy. AoME maintained a strong presence in discussions on medical education careers policy, working closely with partner organisations across the sector.

Like many organisations, AoME endured significant disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face activities ceased almost overnight, but the administrative team ensured that the Academy's work continued online. Attendance at meetings actually increased, and the Insights series of online seminars was launched, attracting large international audiences. The annual conference was moved online, becoming a three-day event in September 2021, and DMEG's first annual meeting was held virtually in early 2022. These developments accelerated AoME's adoption of online working, which continues to add to its programme of in-person events.

Alongside its support for early-career educators, AoME also sought to recognise educational leadership. The Professional Standards were revised[10] to include a fourth level describing excellence in educational leadership, paving the way for the introduction of Principal Fellowship. AoME also launched its Professional Register, increasing transparency and accountability for the public while further strengthening professional recognition within medical education.

2023–present: Nick Cooper

Like his predecessors, Nick was involved with AoME for many years before his election as President. And, like them, he sees his role primarily as one of outreach and bridge building alongside supporting the membership and the profession. As Inaugural Chair of the Physician Associate (PA) School Council he encouraged and supported PA educators to seek AoME recognition alongside their existing colleagues in medical, dental and veterinary education.

AoME is a well-established organisation these days, with membership continuing to grow, and a stable administration and governance system to support new initiatives. AoME has even been able to offer support to other organisations, in the same way that it was itself supported in its early years. AoME and the European Board of Medical

Examiners (EBMA) had worked closely in the past and had even held a joint conference in 2016. AoME was therefore pleased to be able to assist the EBMA to move successfully from its home in the Netherlands to a space in the AoME office in Cardiff in 2024-5, thus ensuring its survival at a difficult time for the organisation. AoME has also participated in joint conferences with other organisations including the International Network for Health Workforce Education (INHWE) as it seeks to expand its network of influence.

Nick foresees that medical education is changing rapidly and AoME will need to keep up with the times. Artificial intelligence (AI) and the increasing globalisation of medical education are likely to reshape medical education in many fundamental ways, not all of them for the better. Nick believes that AoME has an important role to play in encouraging the exchange of ideas and policy, both nationally and internationally, to help educators navigate these changes.
Nick has been involved in discussions with colleagues overseas who are keen to benefit from what AoME has to offer. AoME is also creating opportunities for international debate and collaboration. One example was the DMEG conference, Medical Education without Borders: EDI and Globalisation, held online in August 2025. Another is the new Journal of the Academy of Medical Educators, an international platinum open-access journal,[11] which launched in January 2026. Medical educators from around the world are increasingly joining AoME and using its Standards to support recruitment, curriculum design and educator appraisal.

All the Presidents I spoke to when writing this article were modest in reflecting on their time in office. They were keen to acknowledge the outstanding teams and individuals they worked with, and to express their gratitude for the support and expertise they received. None wished to claim personal credit for AoME's achievements, recognising them instead as the product of a collective effort. They mentioned many individuals to whom they were grateful – too many to name here.

Yet, as someone who has worked closely with them all, I think it is incumbent on everyone within AoME and beyond to recognise and honour our Presidents for their individual achievements. We have been incredibly fortunate to have five such talented, principled, and visionary leaders. Each, in their own distinct way, has shaped and guided AoME into the influential and thriving institution it is today, and established a firm foundation for the future.

"The future is in the hands of those who give the next generation reason for hope."
— Attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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Declarations

Funding: N/A

Conflicts of Interest: N/A

Ethical Approval: Not required.

Authors Contributions: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing (original draft), review & editing.