# Our International Congress this year: a galaxy of talent and the UK voice of psychiatry

It will soon be time for our annual congress. Last year over 2,500 members came to London, our biggest audience yet. However, if current registrations are a valid guide, this year will surpass that number. But it will still be the case that the majority of you will not be there, especially when we take into account our overseas members. So as I did last year, I thought it would be a good idea to at least let those who can’t make it know what they are missing. And for those of you who are attending, look away now.

We do indeed have a galaxy of talent on show in Birmingham. Our keynotes alone will entice anyone to dip into the exciting variety of talks, posters and à-la-carte activities available to sample over the next four days. Top of the bill has to be Sir John O’Keefe, Britain’s most recent Nobel Laureate. Anyone who heard his interview on the Today programme after receiving his Nobel Prize will remember not just his modesty and scientific authority, but also his extolling of the NHS as the reason that he decided to make his career here. Add to that Helen Mayberg, probably the leading light in contemporary neuro-imaging, our own Sir Michael Owen and finally Dame Linda Partridge, one of the world’s foremost authorities on the aging process.

So our science line up would definitely receive three stars from any passing Michelin inspector.

But there is still more. Maggie Atkinson was the last Children’s Commissioner, and I hope that freed from the chains of office she will be even more outspoken than ever when she talks on Tuesday morning. I started my career in forensic psychiatry, doing my doctorate on crime and schizophrenia. One of the authorities then and now was Renee Binder, who took up office as the President of the American Psychiatric Association last month, and will be addressing us on violence and mental disorder.

Professor Diana Rose will continue our tradition of ensuring that the service user voice is well represented across the College. Tom Shakespeare will I am sure be captivating and compelling as he talks about mental health and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. And later on Wednesday we welcome Simon Stevens. I can’t for the moment remember what he does for a living – ah yes, it comes back to me now – he runs NHS-England.

If that was not enough, anyone who overindulges at Wednesday’s gala dinner and oversleeps on Thursday morning will be kicking themselves for months because they will miss David Aaronvitch. His Times’ columns are essential reading – witty, controversial and wise (code for I agree with him 99% of the time).He will be talking on a subject that would fascinate anyone, but will have particular relevance to us – conspiracy theories.

Congress or no congress, politics of course never stops. Since we last met we have had a general election, whose results surprised everyone, whatever their political persuasion.  One consequence was that we had to say goodbye to Norman Lamb, who had particular responsibility for mental health in the Coalition government.  Putting party politics to one side, I think that no one will deny Norman’s commitment to mental health during his time in office, and will join me in thanking him for his efforts and wishing him well in the future. It is however encouraging that the new government has signalled a continuing commitment to mental health, and indeed our new Minister, Alistair Burt, asked to come and speak to us soon after taking up office. He will be assured of a warm welcome on Thursday, and we hope this will prove the start of a fruitful relationship. As the UK voice of psychiatry, we are in a unique position and indeed a position of responsibility to provide a calm, wise and professional voice to advise the new government on mental health issues. There is already much going on – we are already taking a major part in the Mental Health Taskforce chaired by Paul Farmer, CEO of MIND, that began its work last month in proposing a mental health strategy  (apparently road maps are very passé now) for the next administration. Likewise, the College has also played its part in providing an outline of what we think should be achieved within the administration’s “First 100 Days”.

I am looking forward to meeting as many of you as I possibly can over the coming few days, and urge you to take full advantage of the learning opportunities, social events and networking opportunities.  Finally, no sooner does one Congress ends than the next one begins. Thanks to our fantastic organising staff, all our Congresses excel, so it is only fitting that next year we will be at the Excel in London.

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