

# 14 Witnessing the witnesses

## Potentials and pitfalls of the witness seminar in the history of twentieth-century medicine

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"Witness: One who is or was present and is able to testify from personal observation; one present as a spectator or auditor."<sup>1</sup>

The History of Twentieth Century Medicine Group, home to the long-running "Witness Seminars," was established in 1990 by the British medical research charity, the Wellcome Trust. Its goals include promoting the historical study of recent medicine and medical science, creating and strengthening synergistic links between professional medical historians and members of the biomedical research community, and emphasizing the potentials of working jointly.<sup>2</sup> A Programme Committee of historians, biomedical scientists, and practitioners oversees the Group's activities.<sup>3</sup> An important part of the Group's mission has been to encourage the deposit of conventional archives related to the history of recent medicine, such as personal and professional papers as well as research artifacts such as computer tapes, visual material, and equipment in appropriate repositories.

But in recent years we have concentrated our efforts on a novel approach to oral history: the Witness Seminar. Involving numerous participants—all recorded simultaneously and able to interact with each other and with the seminar convenors—the Witness Seminars produce group discussions on topics of special interest. As with other products of the History of Twentieth-Century Medicine Group, we make these collective oral history materials available for widespread use.

Oral testimonies, both individual and collective, are important—if contested—tools for historians of recent science, technology, and medicine, although this is not the place to discuss such limitations.<sup>4</sup> We have developed a series of group oral history meetings that arose from one of our routine seminars held in 1992 on the subject of "Interferon." At that meeting, we were intrigued and impressed by the extensive, animated, and illuminating discussions between the chairman and members of the invited audience, many of whom had participated in the discoveries under investigation. Their discussions alerted us to the importance of recording "communal" eyewitness testimonies. We decided to organize a formal group oral history meeting, to which we would invite people associated with a particular set of circumstances or events in recent medical history. Once gathered, we would urge them to discuss, debate, agree, or disagree about their reminiscences and their significance. Whilst doing so we learned that the Institute for Contemporary British