Concluding remarks

M. J. R. HEALY

First, may I thank you for allowing an outsider to attend your symposium. I have learnt a great deal in the past two days which will stand me in good stead in the future.

It would be both futile and discourteous to try to summarize the content of the many papers we have heard. Instead, let me simply underline a few general points that were made by more than one speaker and which seem to me to be of cardinal importance. The first is the need for distinguishing between mechanization, automation, and the use of computers. We have had held out to us the promise of revolutionary developments in laboratory practice following the installation of what have been disrespectfully described as 'all-singing, all-dancing' systems. These are going to cost a lot of money, and we do not yet have the experience to know to what extent it will be money well spent. Let us rather—or, better, let you rather, for you know best where the shoe pinches—examine all the means available of improving the effectiveness of laboratory medicine without worrying too much if some of them appear less glamorous than others.

Following on from this thought is the vital necessity for pathologists to become and remain personally involved in all the developments of laboratory medicine. Here I may be preaching to the converted, for this meeting has differed strikingly from others I have attended in the number of speakers who described what had actually been done, rather than what they hoped shortly to be able to do; yet I must express the hope that you will allow the engineer and the computer specialist right inside your laboratories while at the same time maintaining your own right to declare what the real needs

of those laboratories are and the conditions under which they may be met. I am without doubt a very clever fellow when it comes to computers or statistics, and it is tempting to assume that I can very quickly learn enough to tell any pathologist how to go about his business; it is a temptation that I ask you to help me resist.

Lastly, may I raise my voice and speak both to you and through you to administrators and the controllers of expenditure in the universities and the British National Health Service. It is, as I say, striking how many pathologists have by now acquired actual painful experience of living with computers as opposed to playing with them, a perfectly legitimate research activity, by comparison with the numbers of medical workers and practitioners in almost any other field; and yet, in absolute terms, the number is tiny indeed. The level of quotation at this symposium has been so high that I hesitate to join in, but I will permit myself two sayings which seem to me to have relevance to our situation. Professor Gill, of Imperial College, one of our leading computer men, has said: 'We have spent a number of years thinking about computer developments; this would be a good year for doing something about them.' And another author, perhaps not often heard in this splendid theatre, once said: 'The philosophers have attempted to understand the world; the point, however, is to change it'. Until more of us are in a position to make mistakes—in the use of automation and computers—mistakes, let us hope, which we are original enough not to copy from our predecessors, the lessons we must learn to improve the contribution of the laboratory to the care of the sick will be a long time in the learning.