

Welcome to the latest edition of the Journal. We have an interesting mix of articles in this issue including a major contribution from Richard Hixson who has re-invented the wheel – but a wheel with a difference. There are several unusual case reports – including a sobering contribution from Ahmed Fuat - and an interview with Hilton Dixon, Clinical Director of the PCTs. Tom Marsh – our junior rep and Review Editor has again challenged us with his reviews – including this time two film reviews. Malcolm Bateson's contributions as usual will raise a chuckle – but with a serious twist.

I am profoundly grateful to Andrew Michie – our GP Editor who has contributed our editorial.

Enjoy!

Editorial

*'I will pay the same respect to my master in the science of medicine as to my parents and share my life with him and pay all my debts to him...'*¹

Hippocrates 4th Century BC

There comes a stage in your life when you are obliged to take your parents in hand. My mother and father had allowed their house to become overrun by their books; they needed serious de-cluttering. And so it was, recently, that I came to find, in the back of a bedroom, the complete set of desk diaries from 1953 until retirement in 1984 in which my father, a Kent GP, recorded all his home visiting. Known in my family bizarrely as his 'derchy' diaries, Dad had, for whatever reason it was, managed to retain an eerie record of his working life in practice. Picking up a volume at random, 1962, I found, on page after page and written in his neat but barely legible hand, lists of patients and their addresses; each then crossed through as the visit had been completed. So many names. So many pages. Averaging twenty five or so visits a day, day after day, week after week. Nights and weekends and Bank holidays. Christmas Eve (always busy), Christmas Day (always light).

Taking a bite from Proust's madeleine, as it were, I flick through the months and, transported back in time, I suffer a welling of emotion. A seven year old boy, seeming barely to see his father for days, unless as a special treat the children might be allowed to stay up until eight or eight-thirty or whenever it was that his father, at last, came home from surgery. And then those endless times, waiting, bored in the back of the car while his father was in the patient's house. Dad then, on the doorstep having a final word with the wife, the husband, the parent before his trudge back to the car, bag in hand. Or the stories from practice; strange diagnoses; dramatic encounters; a farmer locked in his bathroom with a shotgun, called by the police: 'you go first doctor'. Year after year.

This was an age when medicine was a heroic profession. A 'band of brothers' as my father would describe his partners. A time of devotion to duty; family-life and practice-life indistinguishable.

So what, then, to make of the GMC's recently announced intention to withdraw the age exemption from the Annual Retention Fee (ARF)? On the face of it, in a post-Shipman world of revalidation, removing a retired doctor's automatic right to remain registered might seem a neat way to tidy up the medical register. Protecting patients from out-of-date, superannuated doctors. A logical stage in modernising the medical profession perhaps? The proposal would remove, at a stroke, 30,000 doctors from the medical register; including, as it happens, my father.

Or does it, in fact represent something less well-intentioned? Rather, led by the political agenda aimed at undermining the profession's status in the eyes of our patients, the action could be seen as another step in this belittling process. Politicians, for a long time envious of the esteem in which doctors have been held by the public, have resented this obstacle to the control of what was always an independently minded profession. The proposed withdrawal of the age exemption from the ARF, is a further example of the downgrading of the medical profession and of the advance of political control.

The guidance from the GMC, helpfully sent out to all affected doctors², points out that under the proposals they can still use the title 'doctor', but as this title isn't protected by law, so can anyone, and so is in effect meaningless. To call oneself 'GP' or 'physician', however, would be an offence. My father, who wrote his last prescription over 20 years ago, but is nevertheless proud of a working life spent serving his patients, simply regards this as mean-minded humiliation.

When Hippocrates formulated his oath 2,500 years ago, he recognised the importance of respect for our elders in the profession, setting it on a level with respect for 'our parents'. For 'our masters' are the custodians of the traditions of justice, independent thought and concern for our patients above all else. In an age of the questioning of received dogma, it might be convenient for some to discard our predecessors in the ageist way proposed by the GMC. If we allow this disregard to prevail, however, we risk humiliation as a profession; and that will never be in our patients' interests. At the time of writing the BMA has called for a judicial review of the GMC's plans. Let's hope that by the time you read this it has succeeded, for the sakes of our profession, our patients and my father's self-respect.

Andrew Michie, Blackett's Medical Practice, Darlington.

References:

- (1) Hippocratic Oath: translated J.Chadwick, Wn. Mann 1950.
- (2) General Medical Council: 'Your Options Following the withdrawal of age exemption from the Annual Retention Fee'. 06/8/08.