



**Review:**  
**Phil Hammond's Rude Health Show**  
**Darlington Arts Centre 16<sup>th</sup> March**

Phil Hammond is described as a “Comedian and GP” and has become something of a minor celebrity since he savaged Andrew Lansley on Question Time last year over the Health and Social Care Bill. Phil told us that the Bill is in fact twice the length of Bevan’s Bill which established the NHS in the first place! He is a GP in Somerset and Medical Correspondent of *Private Eye* writing the Medicine Balls column under the pseudonym “M.D.” and has been instrumental in exposing a number of NHS scandals – most famously the Bristol Cardiac Surgery debacle. His visit to Darlington – as part of a nationwide tour – was primarily as a comedian, and Dr Phil (as he styles himself) is very funny indeed.

For me, as a fifty-something consultant, it was a bit of a trip down memory lane. Dr Phil’s repartee is reminiscent of jokes and stories told over the Doctors’ Mess dining table (in the days when there was a Doctors’ Mess with a dining table). But from memory none of us was ever able to string the stories together with the speed and skill that Dr Phil demonstrates. He regaled us with stories of unfortunate patients with rectal foreign bodies and the interesting explanations of how they apparently got there – including the man who appeared in Casualty with a turnip in an unfortunate place, who was trying to think of empathetic ways of sharing his wife’s pain

in childbirth. But as well as the scatological humour there was political comment – which was truly ecumenical. Cameron, Clegg and Miliband were mocked in equal measure. Some thought-provoking semi-serious medical points were made too, highlighting the difficulties of drawing scientific conclusions from the association of phenomena. For example - the Japanese drink much less wine than we do and have less heart disease. The French drink much more wine than we do and have less heart disease. The conclusion is that speaking English is a major risk factor. When we were splitting our sides laughing, one of his catch phrases was “It’s not so funny when it’s read out in court” – which was also funny as it is so true.

There is a sad side to Phil’s story too. He was born in Australia but came to the UK as a child when his father died. It was only much later that he discovered that his father had committed suicide and not died of a heart attack as he had been told at the time. This might partly explain why he has a real concern that medicine has lost its humanity. One of his heroes is Dame Cicely Saunders – the pioneer of the hospice movement - who said “One of the beauties of being human is that you can be humane”. So many of the pressures we work under now make this very difficult, not least (without advocating euthanasia) in trying to ensure a humane death.

Dr Phil feels we should face politicians and managers by being assertive without being aggressive. For patients his prescription is laughter therapy. Stop prescribing drugs, start prescribing fun. Not such a bad idea – and perhaps time for NICE to issue the same advice?