

The Association of Clinical Pathologists

Winter 2007

acp **N**ews



NOSTALGIA: FANGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE!



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They don't do it like that anymore
Early ACP management courses
A guide to giving feedback to students
Dr Lishman goes to Westminster

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Editorial

Nostalgia

Part of the fun of editing *acp News* is selecting a theme for each issue. Sometimes it is easy because a set of leading articles has already been commissioned with a particular topic in mind. At other times there just seems to be a *smörgåsbord* of unrelated articles on various topics and finding a common thread becomes much more of a challenge. It is then that I find the best approach is to just flick through the articles with a completely blank mind (not hard to do on a Friday afternoon, I can tell you!) and see what emerges. This time it fairly quickly became evident that nostalgia was the dish of the day.

Actually, the word itself has quite an interesting derivation. It began life as a medical term coined in 1688 to mean homesickness (the Greek words *nostos* meaning returning home and *algia* a pain or longing). Nostalgia was commonly used as a diagnosis, particularly in soldiers serving away from home, and up to as recently as the American Civil War. It was even sometimes given as a cause of death. I might try that one on the coroner sometime!

Anyway, as *acp News* takes a slow stroll down memory lane I, too, am in a reflective mood as this is my penultimate issue as editor. In time-honoured tradition, the identity of my successor remains a secret for now, but all will be revealed in the next issue.

Airport

This summer I had a very pleasant holiday on the sleepy Maltese island of Gozo, a sun-kissed refuge from the normal commercialism that has so blighted many other European holiday destinations. Only one thing really marred this otherwise perfect fortnight of relaxation and brought me back to a question I find myself asking whenever I travel. What is the air travel industry's problem?

Now, I accept that we went just a few days after a group of junior doctors had tried to drive a booby-trapped car into Glasgow Airport, a move we are assured was entirely unconnected to MTAS or MMC. But aside from banning vehicles from going near the terminal building, which was not really an issue as that is what the car parks are there for anyway, nothing else seemed to have changed much. The level of anxiety and paranoia generated within the confines of the airport building was pretty much as before. Am I alone in thinking this is all a bit over the top?

I know that many are anxious about flying, although I am assured that statistically you are more likely to be killed on your drive to and from the airport (in fact, you would have to fly on a commercial aircraft every day for 18,000 years before your chances of being in a crash exceeded 50%), but the corporate state of mind that imagines there are terrorists lurking unseen around every corner does nothing to calm those fears, or to make the airport "experience" the enjoyable part of your holiday that their advertising propaganda would have you believe.

Although no one wants to be on a plane that is bombed or hijacked, surely the risks are incredibly small? The events of 9/11 (or I suppose 11/9 this side of the pond) were shocking and tragic, yes, but weren't they a one-off? And even if a terrorist group wished to try it again, does not the answer lie in training of cabin crew, including provision of appropriate means of defence, and in securing the cockpit so passengers cannot just take over the flight? By all means vet our hand luggage for knives, but surely depriving little old ladies of their nail files is somewhat OTT? As was making me throw away a bottle of perfectly good suntan lotion I just happened to have in my hand luggage!

And what is all this about making us take our shoes off and X-raying them? Apart from the fact that this is a less than savoury pastime on a hot summer's day, does this really improve flight safety? All this on the basis of one case of a would-be terrorist trying to shoe bomb a plane,



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and then even he couldn't get them to light. Or maybe I am just ignorant here and airport security services have already prevented numerous terrorist attempts by X-raying the flip-flops of groups of young girls off on hen weekends wearing T-shirts bearing such advertisements as "Mad For It Mavis", "Slapper Susan" and "Vibrator Vicky" – they have just been carefully kept out of the media for fear of causing mass panic.

Along with the ban on liquids, the other response to last summer's terrorist threat was a restriction on hand luggage to one item each. Why? Yes there is limited storage space, as there always has been, but why are two smaller bags any more of a security threat than one large one? I would have thought it would be easier to hide a bomb inside a large case than inside two or three little ones. Obviously I am missing something here.

These days air travel should be becoming much more routine, particularly as a domestic flight from one end of the country to the other is not only much quicker, but can also be a lot cheaper than going by rail. It seems that, apart from the damage to the environment, the only barriers are the long waits, the restrictions on hand luggage and the paranoid security. But is the degree to which they are enforced really in proportion to the threat?

Part of the problem is that the measures put in place are largely reactive rather than proactive. The would-be terrorists come up with a ruse, whether it be taking over the plane, mixing up volatile liquids or setting fire to their shoes, and the security boffins react by banning knives, liquids and shoes. But, whatever you may think of their motives, terrorists are not stupid people. They will find something else and if al Qaeda finds a way of hiding a bomb in a wristwatch, for example, is that going to mean that airport security will then ban watches from all flights? Probably yes. Recently it was even suggested that the long queues for security checks might themselves pose a terrorist target. Well, thanks for giving them that idea, although I have no doubt they will have already thought of it!



Look out below!

The point I am making is that the response seems to outweigh the real risks. Actually, I think given the choice of being blown up on a plane or on the underground there is a slightly claustrophobic element in me that would choose the plane every time. A terrorist attack on the London underground might be every bit as devastating as on a plane, as we have seen, but no one makes you turn up two hours beforehand, carry only one piece of hand luggage with no liquids, and take off your footwear to be X-rayed every time you want to catch the tube.

Folk of my parents' generation lived through the Blitz and carried on with their lives, despite a far greater daily risk than any terrorist group outside Iraq could ever pose. Maybe we, too, need a bit more of that wartime spirit. The psychology of terrorism is more to do with creating the fear of what might happen than with what actually does, and the way in which that affects the target group in their daily lives. Are we not allowing them to do just that?

Ignorance about science

It was on holiday, and possibly following that extra G&T, that I found myself trying to explain some basic science to my educated and intelligent, but non-scientific, companion. OK, quantum mechanics was not the best place to start, I grant you, but even so the concerned look on her face made it clear that I might as well be talking gibberish, and from her point of view I probably was. I am not the first to remark upon the paradox that, even in educated circles, there is commonly a wealth of knowledge about the likes of the arts and philosophy, but an almost total ignorance of even the most basic scientific principles.

There are many recurrent questions that the greatest minds of our species have been pondering for millennia and it doesn't take more than a superficial reading of a book on philosophy to realise that those same issues are the main ones challenging science today. The difference is that, whereas in the past many of those questions could only be addressed by abstract reasoning, scientific enquiry may actually stand a chance of providing some sorts of answers. So why is it considered dead clever to be able to quote chunks of

Shakespeare, or to speak knowledgeably about art, but it carries no stigma to know nothing about science?

Take for example what I would consider the three most important insights of the last 150 years, and I haven't even included such biggies as the structure and function of DNA or the "new" genetics. Firstly, evolution; most non-scientists would have heard of it, but the objections of groups of creationists clearly demonstrate how little they actually understand. Not only that, but it is often stated, quite wrongly, that Darwin discovered evolution, which he didn't. Evolution was known about, or at least suspected, as long ago as the time of the Ancient Greeks (those Greeks weren't stupid and they could see from comparative anatomy that there had to be a link between Man and Apes, they just couldn't think of any way by which one could have become the other). It was Darwin who supplied the most plausible explanation as to how it could have occurred – random variation, natural selection and survival of the fittest.

But what about relativity? Again, most would have heard of Einstein's theory, but how many could tell you what it is (actually, there are two: general and special relativity) or what it means? They are theories that suggest the most extraordinary things about the universe in which we live, they even tell us that what we instinctively perceive as time is not what it seems. They tell us that gravity is really a bending of space-time by matter. They tell us that matter and energy are really aspects of the same thing. Yet, counterintuitive as they are, these predictions have been upheld in just about every test to date, including the ones that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War Two.

And thirdly, what I would consider the most paradigm shifting insight of all, quantum mechanics. This is a theory (and I use the term in its scientific sense, not as in the non-scientist's objection, "but it's *only* a theory!") that has been around and itself evolving for over 80 years. An overview of its workings, leaving aside the maths which I cannot even begin to grasp, is nothing short of mind-blowing. Even Einstein, whose early work (not



The editor getting in the spirit of things last Xmas

relativity) led to the framing of the theory, could not accept what it appeared to be revealing. As he famously said, "God does not play dice with the universe." And renowned American physicist and populariser of science, Richard Feynman, once said, "I think I can safely say that no one understands quantum mechanics."

In the quantum world of the atom, particles can behave as waves, waves (such as light) can behave as particles, and they can be in many places at once, only fixing to be in one place when someone actually looks at them (yes, really!). They can probably go both forwards and backwards in time and jump from one place to another without going through the space in between. There is, I believe, some evidence that this weird behaviour is also exhibited by whole molecules. There are probably at least 11 dimensions, not the four (three plus time) with which we are familiar, and there may be an infinite number of universes besides our own. "God" does indeed seem to play dice with the universe, and on a grand scale! What all this says about the "real" world we experience, no one knows, but it is likely that the answers, if we ever find them, will also resolve those questions that have puzzled philosophers for a very long time. Isn't it staggering that the majority of the



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“educated” population doesn’t seem to know or care about any of this?

The point is more important than just a scientist’s irritation at the value placed on an education in the arts whilst accepting, nay even being proud of, a complete ignorance of science, save for a few O-level chemistry practicals spent trying to set fire to the asbestos mats. Something like half of the population of the most powerful nation in the world believes in creationism. Powerful and influential people support “complementary” medicine, despite no evidence base. The issues surrounding global warming are complex, even to a scientist, yet our handling of this is ultimately determined by politicians and a voting public largely ignorant of and unable to weigh up the issues. We live in a world dependant on a technology, the principles of which the majority do not grasp, choosing to place more value on knowledge of what are, when all is said and done, really just human daubings.

In this issue

As I said, nostalgia seems to be the entirely unintentional theme of this issue. Sebastian Lucas looks back on the development of his own career and tells us, “They don’t do it like that anymore.” Keith Shinton writes about the history of the ACP management courses and Barry Hancock, professor of clinical oncology in Sheffield, looks back on 33 years of working with cancer. Purely by coincidence, Dennis Wright is in reflective mood following his trip back to Africa. Interestingly, he appears to have worked in the same place as Sebastian for part of his early career, although obviously a year or two earlier.

Also in this issue is the third part of Julian Burton’s mini-symposium on medical education. This issue’s topic is “A guide to giving feedback to students”. As well as writing regularly, Julian is a valued asset as an assistant editor and has been responsible for soliciting many of the excellent articles that have appeared in this magazine, including the two student essays that both won first prize for journalism and Barry Hancock’s piece in this issue.

My friend and colleague, Suzy Lishman, will be known to many as the College’s assistant registrar. I have been nagging her to write something for *acp News* for some time and it has finally happened. As she says, it is not clear who is more surprised, her or me! “Dr Lishman



Err ... wrong star!!!

goes to Westminster” is a personal account of being called to give evidence to a parliamentary select committee on the formation of RATE, the Regulatory Authority for Tissue and Embryos, combining and replacing the functions of the Human Tissue Authority with those of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. I am no expert, but it doesn’t take a genius to work out that such a merger is probably a bad idea!

What else? Well, I like hearing about people with strange hobbies. Sarah Dixon (nee Tucker), a medical secretary/PA at Manchester Royal Infirmary, writes for fun and one of her stranger interests is finding unusual subjects for post mortem reports (unlike the more conventional kind of her day job). This time the subject is her recent wedding at Chester Zoo, which both Lorna McWilliam and Emyr Benbow suggested would sit well in *acp News*. How right they were!

Cover Story

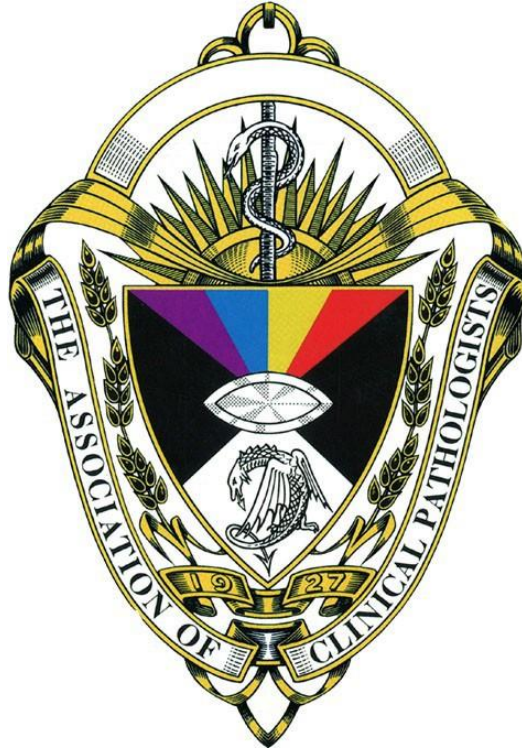


Mammoth head

This issue’s cover image is of a mammoth head that hangs in the museum in Prague. It was photographed by the editor during a short break from the International Scientific Meeting held there in 2006.

Related to the Asian elephant, mammoths had small ears, long curved tusks and a woolly coat. The trunk is a fusion of the nose and upper lip and the tusk is an extremely elongated second upper incisor. The belief that mammoths were larger than modern-day elephants is a myth.

The extinction of the mammoth was probably due to a combination of climate change and hunting by early man. Perhaps it is an appropriate image for a nostalgic issue. Fangs for the memories, so to speak!



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