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## October Focus

Ronald Knox composed a familiar limerick to express the philosophical problem of the physical existence of phenomena when the observer is absent:

*'There once was a man who said, 'God  
Must think it exceedingly odd  
If he finds that this tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the Quad'.*

Busy as general practitioners are, it is perennially hard to bear in mind that we see only a small fraction of all the illness that exists in the world. We all know about the pattern characterised as the 'iceberg phenomenon', but by its nature it is easy to ignore. As the authors of a study of women with angina symptoms put it on page 784, 'Little is known about the clinical importance of disease that is not presented to healthcare services'. The study concluded that hidden angina is common, but has a low mortality rate. Looking at a different pattern from another angle, a study on infections (page 778) notes that antibiotic prescribing for respiratory tract infections has been falling since 1995. The authors conclude that this is a result of a real fall in the rates of infections, rather than a change in doctors' or patients' behaviour.

Departing further from the metaphor, we have a paper of the, now familiar, pattern of mental health problems that come to the doctor but remain unnoticed. On page 758 there is another study exploring methods to help doctors to identify these patients, this time by means of an additional screening questionnaire, with some positive results. When doctors' poor recognition of depression was first reported, some wondered if there was any benefit to patients in improving our diagnostic skills in this area, given the limited range of therapies available. Since then, the therapies themselves have been shown to work effectively. On page 764 there is further encouragement in the form of an RCT reporting positive results from a self-help package of care based on cognitive behavioural therapy provided by practice nurses. Identification of problems in all areas doesn't start with a clean sheet, but depends on the observers knowing what to look for. The review of patients' problems following a stroke on page 803 is a comprehensive guide to the difficulties that can go unnoticed if not actively elicited — another iceberg lying in wait.

However, it doesn't all work in one direction. White coat hypertension is perhaps a true embodiment of Knox's tree: a phenomenon that disappears when there is nobody to observe it. The study on page 790 documents the extent of white coat hypertension in patients either already being treated for or investigated for hypertension. On page 794 an attempt is made to quantify the cost of identifying white coat hypertension.

Thoughts of hidden, or at least covert, phenomena takes us to the heart of general practice. On page 829 Roger Neighbour muses on the performance art of consulting, and the need to be 'a practitioner of a contrived and well-rehearsed skill.' A different view of doctors is given on page 820, where Karen O'Reilly rails against the notion of encompassing real personal development within a Personal Development Plan.

Besides all that, we have to start thinking about the value of a quality that is hard to define, let alone measure. In the last couple of years we have had a trickle of papers discussing the importance of trust in the doctor. On page 798 a paper analyses which experiences are reported by patients to be associated with a high level of trust in the doctor. High levels of trust were reported; perhaps not surprisingly it was associated more with quality than with duration of the relationship with doctors. On page 754 Alan Maynard and Karen Bloor conclude that the health service cannot function without high levels of trust, and that health professionals must take conscious and active steps to promote it. Better management, they think, will never achieve as much.

As for Ronald Knox, my dictionary of quotations attributes to him the familiar description of a baby ('A loud noise at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other'), but also includes the anonymous answer to the opening conundrum:

*'Dear Sir, your astonishment's odd:  
I am always around in the Quad.  
And that's why this tree  
Will continue to be,  
Since observed by Yours faithfully, God'.*

DAVID JEWELL  
Editor

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