

our contributors

John J. Frey III is professor in family medicine at the University of Wisconsin Medical School
jfrey@fammed.wisc.edu

Michael Gordon is a GP Academic Training Fellow at the Institute of General Practice and Primary Care, Sheffield
michael.gordon@nhs.net

Sandra McGregor is a university teacher at Glasgow University and coordinator of the Master of Primary Care Degree. She also delivers the Communications Skills course and PBL for MBChB
jsmg2u@clinmed.gla.ac.uk

Leone Ridsdale is a part-time GP and a part-time neurologist. She lives next door to the Imperial War Museum
L.Ridsdale@iop.kcl.ac.uk

Donald Rumsfeld, for those of you who aren't paying attention, is George Bush's ever-popular Secretary of State for Defense

Blair Smith, unlike Donald Rumsfeld, spends too much time finding funds and obtaining permission for primary care research. He is a Senior Lecturer at Aberdeen, and a member of the *BJGP* editorial board
blairsmith@abdn.ac.uk

Frank Sullivan is a professor of general practice in Dundee
f.m.sullivan@dundee.ac.uk

Nick Summerton practises in Hull and is a newer member of the editorial board of the *BJGP*
N.Summerton@hull.ac.uk

Richard Tutton is a sociologist based at the Institute for the Study of Genetics, Biorisks and Society (IGBiS) at the University of Nottingham. He has a long standing interest in the social implications of genetic research and technologies. He is working with colleagues on a three year project funded by the Wellcome Trust that investigates the use of race/ethnicity categories in genetics research and health policy. For more information see www.nottingham.ac.uk/igbis/reg
Richard.Tutton@nottingham.ac.uk

Val Wass is professor of Community Based Education, Manchester University and chairs the College Examination Board. She has sailed in Croatia
valerie.wass@man.ac.uk

Graham Watt is professor of general practice at Glasgow
G.C.M.Watt@clinmed.gla.ac.uk

James Willis sets sail for the Outer Hebrides as the nights draw in this October

saul miller

Excuses

BIRTHDAY parties, club committee meetings, hog roasts, cricket matches, fetes: you name it, I have missed them in the name of work. Even a wedding once, although I regret that now. On-calls were the ultimate reason for stepping aside from difficult, awkward or just unwanted commitments. No-one could reasonably object without appearing as if they wanted to deny succour to the sick and needy. It played on the consciences of others that they were luxuriating in roles, such as public relations, which paid well and gave them lots of time off but had no moral content. Our claim to be forced to stay and grimly help the diseased when they were free to break off from their apparently responsible professions each weekend, pricked their sense that perhaps they weren't really contributing to society after all.

My father says always to judge the outcome not the expressed intent. To him a failure to appear counts as a failure to prioritise highly enough. So to him my failure to appear at family events due to on-call commitments pricked no conscience: I was simply failing to rank my family commitments highly enough. He has a point, but then sometimes his position appears a tad harsh: on-calls often have been unavoidable commitments in our lives. After all, there are only so many weekends available for normal life when living with the rhythm of a one in three rota. There was a stage in my life when I did an assistantship in a place where on-calls were measured in weeks: during those weeks I was clearly bound to the practice area.

But it wasn't all pain. It wasn't all getting up to go out on pointless errands on cold wet winter nights. It was coming back from Wooler on a summer morning, so early that the children have still not woken, and seeing the rising sun warming the width of the Till valley and all across to the slopes of the Cheviots beyond. Or maybe waiting in the pre-dawn half-light for a badger to lumber along an innominate lane and off through the hedgerow. It was seeing the glassy calm of the sea reflecting an immense cloudless sky on the way over to Holy Island. Then, later, the sympathy for breakfast, a cup of tea made for you. And later still, the quiet admiration of patients who know you were out and know still you will be consulting today.

Becoming only a daytime doctor loses some of these things. It takes away a reason for drying out each week and risks replacing our gentle contempt for alcoholics with empathy. It forces us to cope without perfect knowledge of what goes on in our community since some of it will be happening henceforth without any reference to us. Our excuses are rendered as simple and unemotional as anyone else's. It commits us to having to attend more of those uncomfortable social events, prevents us from hiding behind the needs of the sick and elderly. Moreover, we pay for the privilege of being able to attend all these fusty family events. Like a five-in-one job, being relieved of the burden of on-calls is not without pain.

'What are days for?' asks Philip Larkin before providing his own oblique, romantic response:

*'Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.'*¹

Picture the harassed but caring men muddying their black leather shoes in the perpetual pursuit of illness and suffering in need of relief. He might have asked, 'What are nights for?' and there has been an era in which the same answer might have applied. That era has ended.

Reference

1. Larkin P. Days. In: *The Whitsun weddings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1964.

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