

Contributors

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Richard Lehman's brilliant *Flora Medica* will not be with us for much longer as he has been head-hunted by the *BMJ*. But you saw him here first! His year-long summary of the medical literature will be published in early 2007, and, naturally, will be billed as *Lehman's Hardy Annual*. Gettit!!
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Ashley Liston is a GP in Sunderland
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Saul Miller is a Northumbrian GP with a few sheep on the side.
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Not as odd as you might think. There is a story-teller of general practice, Susan Butler (*BJGPs* passim), who keeps a few sheep herself, and, whisper it, photographs her sheep during anxious dark hours when they could be devoured. See
csbutler@skyoptic.com.au for tense sheep. *BJGP* readers are invited to send pics to Susan for her *Sheep Noir* website

Catherine Snape is a part-time GP at the Gillygate Surgery Research Practice in York. Interested in education, communication in consultations, and 'staying a generalist.' Staying a generalist!! Now that's a fine and noble aspiration
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Saul Miller

Free range

When the planning notice first went up, hardly anyone seemed that concerned. A little clucking, not much else. Despite being closest, the school, which would be only a field away from the proposed chicken shed, was cautious about expressing a view. Understandable: this is a farming area and this was a farming development.

The parents were a little less circumspect. Concerns were expressed about the impact on their children's education. Some felt noise would be an issue given the thousands of birds involved. Others had fears about the increase in early morning traffic, the dangers of egg-transporters to vulnerable children. But the issue that really raised a stink was chicken slurry.

Those who claimed prior knowledge of chicken slurry indicated it would be produced in large quantities, rivers. They pointed out the shed would be uphill and upwind. No one had ever really considered the school to be at risk from flooding before, but this vision of wholesome school sports potentially being washed away on a tide of liquid chicken detritus was more than most could stomach.

Before long the whiff of controversy had spread to the whole village and now become truly noxious. The planning application was quietly withdrawn.

The shed itself did get built however. It went up quite quickly a short while later, in a spot where there was unlikely to be any serious objection because there is no one near enough to take offence. It is quite large, as modern agricultural buildings always are, and looks clean and new. It is on one side of a large field: 10 acres large, I reckon. That has been put to grass; sheep are currently enjoying its amenity. Even the track has been upgraded so even it is clean and tidy.

Naturally, given the strife surrounding the initial plans for the siting of this shed, I was in a state of high excitement as I anticipated the arrival of the inmates themselves. Would it be as bad as had been made out? Or would all those dire warnings about chicken slurry turn out to be cock-and-bull?

It all having gone up so quickly, I felt impatient as several weeks went by and nothing seemed to be happening. The sheep grazed happily on the new grass, the shed and fences shone like an advert in the clear autumn sun. All very pretty, I thought, but what about the egg-production that this was all supposed to be about? Where were the free range hens?

And then I began to develop suspicions. If I strained I could maybe convince myself that there was the sound of clucking coming from inside that shed: perhaps the birds were already there. But in which case why weren't any of them ranging freely outside? Perhaps it was a bit damp, and they were making sure none of their brooders came down with bird flu from hatching in a draught.

Soon I was craning my neck to see if the shed actually had any exits into the field for the fowl. Surely there had to be doors, flaps, openings of some sort. Now I was straining my ears again to hear if someone was playing fox music by the way out.

Several months further on, and albeit from the edge of a new exclusion zone, I have still not seen a single hen pecking about among the fluffy white sheep in the field. Eggs are now on sale but the shed and its immediate area have weathered only slightly: all still looks clean and new. No noise, no smell, no slurry.

What a disappointment. Few new developments live up to their billing.