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15 000 TIMES 15 MINUTES

Do soap operas serve a purpose? Do they need to? In 1950 an everyday story of farming folk was launched on the wireless to educate the rural community of the Midlands in matters pertaining to agriculture and animal husbandry. *The Archers* subsequently became a national institution; one discussed and debated by rural and urban dwellers, rich and poor, men and women. Few TV 'soaps' have that honour. In many a social gathering the latest goings-on in Ambridge serve as a topic for unembarrassed and well-informed debate.

The programme formally dropped its original educational purpose in 1972, but since then has served to introduce listeners to many pertinent social, political and farming topics. It has also covered a wealth of healthcare issues including Elizabeth's congenital heart disease with pregnancy-related problems in later life, Greg's depression and suicide and Ruth's breast cancer. I even recall learning about the ewe abortion strain of *Chlamydia psittaci* in time to give out good advice as a microbiology registrar in 1986.

However, it is a bit 'hit and miss' to rely on 15 minutes a night to cover whole educational curricula, so why is the nation so addicted? First of all, is it really an addiction? A straw poll among acquaintances confirms that phone calls remain unanswered, bleeps ignored and some even admit to pulling over in their car, pretending to be on the mobile phone to avoid being disturbed during that crucial evening slot. Like soft drugs and alcohol, it's easily accessible (repeated twice and available anytime via the internet) and easily hidden from others ... 'my name is Marjory and I am an Archer's addict'.

The Archers like many soaps provides escapism, a feeling of belonging to a community within which there's at least someone with whom to empathise. It makes us consider how different people view the same situation, for example the 15 000th episode: 'Ruth and Sam - will she, won't she?'. We have been made to recognise the

perceptive teenage daughter's timely interruption, the husband's blissful ignorance, the wife's guilt and the lover's desperation leading Ruth to remain true to her sensible Northern character and make a boring, but almost certainly correct, decision (for now).

Whether intentional or not, our national addiction serves to act as an icebreaker in social settings and to provide training in the subtle art of 'life' for this group of addicts. It happens to be jolly good entertainment too!

Marjory A Greig