

## A LONG, STRANGE TRIP

In the late 1990s, medical journals went through a period of intense navel gazing. Evidence-based medicine was at its highest pitch, and conferences at BMA House started worrying about peer review. Lots of editors went along, plus a large number of hangers-on who got co-opted onto groups to look into this and that. I did well out of it all because I met Alec Logan, and the rest (as they say) is history. Which, as readers of this column will know, is a cliché — because clichés were dealt with in the 65th column of which this is the 105th and last.

Oddly (not 'ironically': that might be the word many would choose but readers will know that it is not irony because of columns 14 and 17), the very first regular column was about how nothing is original, how everything has already been written about.

Some topics cropped up more than others. There have been five Secretaries of State for Health. Frank Dobson moved off to be an unsuccessful candidate for Lord Mayor of London just after the column started and escaped mention. Alan Milburn got mention in 12 columns for his 4 years in post, John Reid in four for 2 years, Patricia Hewitt twice that many for her 2 years, and Alan Johnson has barely got into his stride. Blair only appeared in eight columns. If someone wants to analyse just what topics got covered and how many times, please let me know. I tried not to repeat myself too much, but some bees buzz in bonnets more insistently than others. In between the medicine and the politics and the sheer self-indulgence, I have tried to show the wonders of the English language.

In some ways it has been, with apologies to the Grateful Dead, a long strange trip. Anaesthetists, unless they do pain clinics, don't come across GPs in their daily practice. This anaesthetist has enjoyed his contact with GPs very much. My favourite column? The one about phrasal verbs (April 1999). The one I most enjoyed writing? Our conquest of Beinn Dearg (August 2005). So neither column was political or even medical.

But this sort of column is best written from the inside, and I am going outside, and I may be some time. I am retiring from the NHS, and we are going walking in the hills for as long as our joints will let us. So, Alec: Beannachd Leat, Tapadh Leat, Sealbh Math Dhuit.

he had blown our cover but at least we would get good service, even if it cost us a few prescriptions before we had finished. And when the food came it was truly delicious. We all pulled crackers and wore the hats and read each other the jokes.

During the main course (turkey with all the trimmings and pink sparkling wine), we noticed quite a lot of noise coming from another long table at the far end. They were a large, mixed party and I think someone must have been making a witty speech, because every so often there would be a great roar of laughter and applause and some shrieks from the girls. One of our waiters said they were from Potters' Plastics, where they make those little models of well-known people. I said to Dr Brenda: 'Isn't that where Norman Gland works?' 'Yes, Mrs Flagg, she replied, 'I believe it is. You don't suppose he...'. Before she could finish there was a dreadful cry from the Potters' table and a chair went over. Waiters came rushing up to us saying: 'Please, doctor, a gentleman has been taken very ill, could you help him please?' So of course all my doctors dashed over as did Dawn and me and the nurses.

Well, would you believe it, there was Norman Gland himself, lying on the floor, pink in the face and gasping like a fish. Dr Brenda loosened his tie and collar while Dr Teacher felt his pulse and Dr Grimes inspected the contents of his glass. Then Mr Gland found his voice: 'I think there's a Brussels sprout wedged in the bend of my duodenum,' he croaked, 'I can feel it — just — here.' Dr Brenda gave him a glass of water to sip and he gradually began to recover, so they helped him back to his chair. The other Potters' people seemed to think it was all a bit of a lark (once they saw he was going to be all right) and said things like, 'Ooh you didn't half give us a scare, Mr Gland!' Just as well my doctors were there in my opinion, but as I said to Dr Teacher, when we were seated again, you never know in our profession when or where you are going to be needed next.

'Very true, Mrs Flagg,' he replied, 'at this time of year the nation's digestion lies in our hands. Might I just trouble you for the cranberry sauce which is by your right elbow. Thank you so much.'

*From Mrs Flagg's diary.*