

The Review

A single-handed GP

David Henry Lewis, who died 10 years ago, was a London GP and perhaps the most colourful seafaring adventurer of the second half of the last century. Undeterred by his limited experience as a seaman he left his practice in the hands of a locum to compete in the first single-handed transatlantic race in 1960. He snapped his main mast a few hours out of Plymouth, yet still reached New York in 53 days, coming third out of five competitors. He published his observations on the physical and emotional stress of extended single-handed sailing in the *BMJ* and the *Journal of the College of General Practitioners*,¹ the forerunner to the *BJGP*.

After this, his return to general practice was brief. He sold his house and practice in 1964 and together with his wife and two daughters, the youngest still in a carry cot, set sail for the first circumnavigation in a catamaran. He sailed the 2200 miles from Tahiti to New Zealand without the aid of compass, sextant, chart, or any other navigational aid, solely relying on naked eye observations of wave patterns, sea life, and sun, moon and stars, to prove his theory that the ancient Maoris had been capable of long-distance voyaging using the same methods. He reached New Zealand only 26 miles south of his intended landfall, and published the results of his observations in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Navigation* and the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*. After being granted a scholarship at the Australian National University he purchased *Isbjørn*, a wooden Scottish fishing ketch, and left England for good to embark on several years of field research in the South Pacific. In 1972 he published *We, the Navigators*,² his book on the ancient art of landfinding in the Pacific, still one of the most important publications on this topic. At the age of 55 he established an iconic reputation among single-handed sailors through his attempt to circumnavigate Antarctica alone. The author and yachtsman Hammond Innes described it as 'the greatest small boat journey into the ice since Shackleton'. Lewis' son Barry probably saved his life by sinking *Isbjørn* just before the voyage commenced. Her wooden hull would have been no match for the fury of the Southern Ocean. Instead he hurriedly purchased the steel-hulled *Ice Bird*, which proved to be

more suited to the task.

He set off from Sydney on 19 October 1972 and soon found himself battling 60-foot waves and hurricane force winds. The first of several capsizes occurred on 29 November: his mast and self-steering gear were smashed to pieces and water started pouring in through a tear in the steel cabin trunk. He was 2500 miles away from his first stop, the American research station at Palmer, when:

*'... the proud yacht of a moment before had become a wreck: high adventure had given place to an apparently foredoomed struggle to survive.'*³

He fought on nonetheless. While bailing continuously, and despite frostbitten hands, he eventually managed to set up a jury rig. A further capsize occurred before he reached Palmer station on 29 January. Too late in the season to continue the voyage, he left *Ice Bird* in the care of the Americans. Returning next summer, he set off for the second leg of his journey on 12 December 1973. History was to repeat itself: he was capsized and dismasted, and again he sailed to safety under jury rig. He had to abandon the return to Sydney and instead limped slowly towards Cape Town, where he tied up his battered little ship alongside the smart yachts of the Royal Cape Yacht Club on 20 March 1974.

Much of Lewis' adventurous life was foreshadowed in his youth and childhood. He was born in 1917 into an Irish-Welsh family in Plymouth. The family emigrated to New Zealand when he was 2 years old, and settled on Rarotonga in the Cook Islands a few years later. True to the unconventional spirit of his family he went to Titekaveka village school with the native children, rather than attending the European school for the children of upper class colonials. His academic education there may have been sketchy (he recalled a teacher who earnestly assured him that 24 and 42 were really the same) but 'many things that I

learned were beyond price',⁴ particularly the sagas of ancient Maori seafaring heroes that inspired the deep and lasting bond with Polynesian culture, which was to resurface in the second half of his life. These happy years ended when the family was expelled following his father's uncompromising stand against the poor quality of the colonial medical service, whose medical officers he publicly denounced as not much better than drunken murderers. Lewis endured 2 years of conventional boarding school life in New Zealand, celebrating the end of this period — against the explicit orders of his headmaster, but with written permission from his parents — with a 430-mile journey home in a self-built, wooden canoe:

*'Looking back, it is now obvious that this undertaking was to set the tone for much of my future life.'*⁴

He entered medical school in Dunedin in 1934, but moved to Leeds, England, in 1938 when his family started farming in Jamaica. His strong socialist views and general disdain for authority failed to win him approval among the conservative circles of the medical fraternity. He qualified in 1942, and — just after getting married to his first wife, who came from a Lithuanian emigrant family in the East End — joined the parachute regiment of the Royal Army Medical Corps. He saw action in France shortly after the D-Day landings. In early 1945 he was posted to Cairo and Palestine, where his political radicalism promptly involved him in the struggle between Arab nationalists and the Zionist movement. After his release from the army he spent 2 years upsetting the colonial authorities in Jamaica, where he was port doctor in Port Royal, with his open disregard for the strict rules of confinement in the local leper colony, before he settled in London in 1948 with his wife and two children. His years of travel seemingly over, he opened a single-handed practice in East Ham.⁴ That same year the NHS was founded, and

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his political views and passion for activism almost immediately got him involved in the struggles of that period. He represented the leftwing Medical Practitioners' Union at the London Trades Council, and even 1 year, in the early 1950s, lead a May Day march from Stepney Green to Trafalgar Square:

‘Something like a century of working class history was reflected in the banners waving behind me that commemorated struggles for a living wage, shorter hours, workshop safety and health, all the way back to Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto. I was deeply moved by the occasion.’⁴

Beyond his passionate political activism he was astute enough to recognise the need for increasing professionalisation and stronger integration of scientific approaches into general practice:

‘An important development was the formation of the College of General Practitioners, the inspiration of Dr John Fry. I was repeatedly shocked by the suddenness with which a healthy middle-aged docker, after an attack of pneumonia one winter, would rapidly deteriorate, develop intractable emphysema, be forced to retire and die soon after — all in the space of two or three years. Statistics indicated that the death rate from chronic bronchitis/emphysema in social group five (unskilled workers) was six times greater than in social group one (professionals). Clearly this was a disease largely caused by social conditions and, therefore, preventable. I approached Fry and the newly formed college and served for some years on the research committee that was formed to evaluate treatments. In retrospect, our antibiotics and the like had much less positive influence than the general clean-

up of London’s air after the killer smog of the 1950s.’⁴

As the years went by, however, and despite his strong commitment, he found himself increasingly at odds with his patients’ outlook, experiencing their aspirations as:

‘... extraordinarily limited and unadventurous. Fears of illness, insecurity, and apparently the sky falling down obsessed them.’⁴

With his first marriage failing, and released from the duty of care to his ailing mother by her death, he felt free to seek new outlets for his reawakening wanderlust. He took note of the publicity around the first ever single-handed transatlantic race and, following a qualifying single-handed cruise to Norway in his newly acquired 25 foot *Cardinal Vertue*, signed up.

Though it may not have been obvious to him at the time, the dies had been cast for an entirely new chapter in his life, leading him away from the world of general practice towards a new career as an explorer, sailor, adventurer, and Polynesian scholar. He was married three times, and, being an unashamed womaniser all his life, entered into a string of relationships with strong and independent-minded women well into his old age. His voyages, adventures, and Polynesian explorations were documented in numerous papers and 12 books, written with lucidity and self-deprecating humour. He became New Zealand’s Yachtsman of the Year in 1965 and Australian National Geographic Magazines Adventurer of the Year in 1998. He was a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit and awarded an honorary MSc by Leeds University for his research into the

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impact of fatigue and solitude. After his *Ice Bird* voyage he continued to lead sailing expeditions into the Antarctic through the Oceanic Research Foundation he helped set up. Financial concerns often forced him back into GP locums, and his appearance seems to have created quite a stir among patients at times. Once a perplexed lady asked a practice nurse about the strange man with the many tattoos, to which the reply was ‘*Oh, he is our resident witch doctor.*’

David Lewis spent his last few years sailing quietly around New Zealand and the east coast of Australia. Probably suffering from senile macular degeneration, he eventually became blind, but was able to finish his last cruise with the help of friends. He died in October 2002, aged 85, in Tin Can Bay, Australia. His ashes were scattered in the Pacific.

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Provenance

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