THE DISEASE OF THE LEARNED
As a philosopher turned GP myself, David Hume has long been my favourite philosopher. He lived in 18th-century Scotland, with renowned Scottish physician William Cullen as his own doctor and friend. Hume attended university at age 12, early even in those days, pushing himself so far that he ended up developing the ‘Disease of the Learned’ — a malady that seems to have been a sort of depression or nervous breakdown. Philosophers can suffer from burnout too.

THE MOST ‘GP’ FIGURE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT
In philosophical circles, Hume is considered to be ‘one of the most important philosophers to write in English’ but his isn’t the name that springs to mind if the man on the street is asked to name a famous philosopher. In fact, there’s much to recommend Hume as the most ‘GP’ figure of the Enlightenment. In An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding he sets out to apply the scientific method to the study of human nature. I can’t think of a more succinct way to describe the aims of the whole enterprise of evidence-based medicine is founded on the assumption that the results of a randomised controlled trial are generalisable and applicable to the patient sitting in front of us. But often the participants in the trials were different from our patients in a variety of ways, not least with respect to comorbidities. This does not mean we should abandon our efforts to make practice more evidence based, but it does mean that when we consider the options we should take full account of messy reality. A healthy dose of Humean scepticism does not have to paralyse us in the decision making but it does counsel caution. ‘Will this tablet truly benefit this patient?’ is not a question that can be answered precisely. But Hume’s ideas save us from ‘philosophical’ fence-sitting about matters of practical importance — he confirms that our natural tendency is to make a judgement even in the absence of ironclad rational proof. And isn’t that what we pay our indemnity fees for?

CHANGE THE FOCUS OF TRAINING
To the extent that philosophy can be defined as ‘thinking about thinking’, it is a discipline that could not exist without reflection. To what extent current training fosters reflective GPs2 can be informed by philosophy. The deeper discontent with the structure of modern education generally — one does not fatten a pig by weighing it — suggest that we need to encourage the natural philosophical tendencies within all of us and change the focus of training from crude accountability to development.

The self-actualisation of true reflective practice is higher up Maslow’s hierarchy of needs than ‘passing my ARCP’.

REFERENCE