

asset. One of the main problems, she believes, throughout the hospital and the NHS generally is the difficulty of getting rid of incompetent and idle staff. The present industrial laws sometimes dictate that people who could profitably be sacked have to be kept on.

The proliferation of poorly trained nurses and agency nurses stems in part from the high drop-out rate among SRNs. I asked Miss Westrope about this wastage. She thinks that the main defect is in recruitment. The people who select nurses for training do not make sure either that the applicant has a clear understanding of what nursing entails or that she genuinely wants to nurse.

Waste

A large amount of mostly non-medical supplies (stationery, soap, toilet paper, crockery, etc) are lost, stolen, broken, and generally wasted in Miss Westrope's hospital. Most supplies can be ordered too easily; sometimes the person in her department ordering supplies has mistakenly requested far too much of something and usually the excessive amount arrives without a murmur of complaint. She thinks there should be a tighter system of accounting for supplies.

People are very careless with hardware—losing pens daily, scrawling notes on headed notepaper, and breaking crockery. This carelessness goes further: not turning off of lights, and leaving doors and windows open in winter. Miss Westrope has often found all the lights on in the antenatal clinic, which is

closed at the weekend, on a Sunday evening. She is not confident of the success of campaigns to encourage people to be more careful, and believes more in systems that work independently of staff—for example, introducing self-shutting doors and simply not supplying pens to staff.

"Sickness"

The amount of sick leave taken by many members of the staff horrifies Miss Westrope. She is convinced that most of the sickness absence could be avoided. The lower a person is in the hospital hierarchy, she has observed, the more likely he or she is to take spurious sick leave. She is also aware of domestic staff who are sick on a day before their day off and then work on their day off for double pay. Such behaviour was once rare among hospital staff but is now becoming common. Miss Westrope was impressed by the system that existed in Canada: staff who had no sick leave in a year received a bonus of two weeks' salary at the end of the year.

Finally, Miss Westrope mentioned the costs incurred by patients abusing the hospital transport system. Too often patients think it their right to be conveyed to hospital by ambulance, taxi, or hospital car no matter what their state of health, and regardless of whether they have a car themselves. She thinks that if a patient is well enough and can arrange to be brought by car then he should do so; and if he does not have a car but is well enough to travel by public transport then he should be given a bus fare, not a taxi fare.

Letter from . . . Chicago

At leisure

GEORGE DUNEA

British Medical Journal, 1979, 2, 1491-1492

In recent years New York has often suffered from a bad press; and the week hardly goes by without some newspaper reporting that the city is broke, finished, and going under—and deservedly so, for this reputedly wicked Gomorrah with its large welfare rolls of supposedly lazy people draws scant sympathy from the more solvent—though less interesting—parts of the United States. We hear much about budgetary difficulties and cutbacks in services, about the municipal hospital system being dismantled, and, of course, about the garbage.

A wonderful town

The garbage, it is true, is not being picked up as it should. But New York remains exciting, vast, wonderfully alive. On Fifth Avenue elegant ladies promenade in the sun, ride in

horse carriages, spend their money at Gucci's and Tiffany's, or cast wistful eyes at the window where Empress Josephine's tiara and the emerald-studded crown of the Romanovs are exhibited behind unbreakable glass. Further on, at La Vieille Russie, rich imperial paintings and golden icons momentarily deceive one into thinking that the czarina is still going strong in St Petersburg. In St Patrick's Cathedral smart young couples swear eternal vows to the splendid sound of a magnificent organ; crowds enjoy their leisure in Central Park, buying pretzels and Italian ice, and feeding gorillas that should not be fed; strains of the "Merry Widow" still reverberate amid the marble columns of the palm court at the Plaza Hotel; and for dinner there are restaurants Argentinian, French, Japanese, Indian, Arabian, Jewish, and vegetarian, not to mention the inimitable Russian tea room, another monument to the fallen Romanovs. Downtown, in the Village and beyond, exciting experimental theatre companies revive the immortal plays of Euripides and Sophocles; decaying warehouses change overnight into lovely art galleries; crowds of tourists in Chinatown spend their money on grotesque mandarin statues and delicious mandarin food; and in Little Italy the young people sit in curbside restaurants sipping capuccino and eating canoli, and deliberating whether to go to college in North Carolina or spend the summer hitchhiking in Europe.

For as little as two dollars those too long in medicine pent

may ride to 14th Street and Broadway, to the old-fashioned second-hand bookstores that, like other disappearing species, should be marked for preservation and protected by benevolent societies; and for another ten dollars may walk away with armfuls of hardcover books—Henry James—De Madariaga—Hardy—Pascal—Hemingway—Villehardouin's Crusades—Madame de Sévigné—and Mandeville, who was not Sir John at all but a French missionary and a German Knight and an Armenian nobleman all in one. And then one may wander with all these newly found companions, stopping to watch the 8-year-olds in black uniforms play coeducational soccer on the grounds of the Catholic school (the girls play just as rough as the boys), or pausing to read about the Emperor Prester John, who had no banners borne before him when he went into battle against any other lord, but three crosses set in chariots fully arrayed; whose palace in Susa is so rich and so noble that no man can imagine it but he that has seen it; and who has also born before him a platter of gold full of earth in token that his noblesse and his might and his flesh shall also turn to earth.¹

From Broadway it is only a stone's throw to Washington Square, with its Arc de Triomphe and its statue of Garibaldi, with the students sitting in the park and playing the guitar or merely enjoying the sun. It must have been on just such a sunny day in July 1676 that the crowds gathered in Paris in front of Notre Dame to watch the execution of the young marquise accused of poisoning her father and her brother. She had confessed everything, noted Madame de Sévigné, but they applied the torture just in case, before letting her do penance to Notre Dame with a rope around her neck, and then burning her poor headless body on the stake and scattering her ashes into the air.² Too late to repent, too late also for the very Catholic Queen of Castille, who fell for Christopher's disastrous plan while Henry VII wisely said no to his brother Bartholomew; for had it been otherwise, muses De Madariaga, the United States would still be where they are, but the Mediterranean would have become a veritable Spanish mare nostrum, with Mexico being in Morocco, Columbia in Algeria, Peru in Tunisia, Chile in Egypt, and Argentina in Asia Minor.³

But leisure is the order of the day, for if action is the music of our life then leisure is the pause, the silence between the movements of a symphony. And man needs leisure, writes Salvador de Madariaga, to contemplate, to be passive, to breathe in just as he breathes out, for only the freedom of his leisure makes man truly free.³ And what can be freer than to wander with books through Washington Square, to eat canoli and sip capuccino, to think thoughts that have nothing to do with the immanence of everyday life.

Electors of zero data

Leisure too, might be a good think for some of our overworked medical interns and residents, lest they continue to incur Dr Christy's wrath for medspeaking so vulgarly that *before* is always *prior to*; that *no change* becomes *zero delta*; and that nothing is ever true but *essentially* true.⁴ Dr Christy does not like pompous *armamentaria* and *symptomatalogies* when shorter words would do. He prefers a longer exposition for *crit*, *lights*, and *oids*. He abhors DKA, PTA, and PTOD. But at least he does not have to squirm when heads are described as *normocephalic* with devastating regularity; when fundi are never seen but always *visualised*; when abdomens *other than being rotund are benign*; and when interns never decide but always *elect* to order a barium meal; bringing forth visions of white smoke rising from the conference room to indicate that the junior house staff has at last reached a consensus. There are shades of old formalin-soaked *Cunningham*, in that patients never have arms or legs but always upper and lower extremities.

And there is even a suggestion of the inquisition—which De Madariaga thought may not have been quite so bad after all—in that patients faced with the ordeal of *specific interrogation* invariably *admit* having cough and sputum but *deny* haemoptysis and paroxysmal dyspnoea.

Perhaps there will be more leisure now that the courts have ruled that house officers are workers and not students, having thus won the right to negotiate collectively in private as well as in public hospitals. But then the trouble may go back even further, to those earnest medical school curriculum committees, always in a state of upheaval, agonising not only about how long it takes to train a doctor, but also whether the vast accumulated knowledge about the area *postrema* should be taught vertically as a single course or horizontally as part of the more traditional scientific disciplines. And with the professors of pathology and phrenology constantly striving to expand their hours and dollars and armies and square feet of property, the issue would be contested even more furiously were it not somewhat overshadowed by the controversy between the meritocracy advocating a grade system and the mediocracy who have *elected* a pass/fail system.⁵ The data on this issue are not yet in—perhaps they never will be. But, meanwhile, a serious student of curricula has published a new taxonomy of their diseases, featuring hypertrophy, carcinoma and arthritis of the curriculum, idiopathic and iatrogenic curriculitis, curricular sclerosis (in which the curriculum appears to be cast in concrete), and curriculum ossification.⁶ Clearly then there is little time for leisure for the faculty member valiantly struggling to cure all these lingering diseases at once, little time to wander about with Salvador de Madariaga to bullfights, to chuckle over his story of the poster above the door of a dressmaker in Tokyo ("Respectable ladies take fits upstairs"), or to learn that *outrage* is not *outridge* because it is derived from *out* and *rage*, not from *outré* and *age*.³

But the illustrious Great John (name fictitious and no relation to the emperor Prester) always had time for leisure. Yet he had written many articles on science and even published a famous book, as well as dabbling in clinical medicine, metaphysics, and even philosophy, tracing the development of our innards from the venerable amphioxus to our present state, so elevated and yet so unhappy that we constantly seek noise and entertainment and television, so that even the great king is unhappy when he is alone and thinks, and that many take comfort not in leisure and contemplation but, like Pyrrhus, in constant struggle against overwhelming difficulties.⁷ But the irrepressible Great John, in an era when many of his colleagues saw no farther than the outer glycoprotein boundary of the cell membrane, read books and wrote symphonies. On special evenings, the legend has it, the more deserving research fellows were invited to the great man's home, and after dinner were given specially printed programmes allowing them to choose between the works of Mozart, Beethoven, Great John, Brahms, or Bach. That the more promising fellows invariably *elected* the symphonies of their host only shows that the correct choice of how to spend one's leisure is by no means incompatible with politeness and enlightenment and concern for advancement in one's *elected* profession.

References

- 1 Mandeville's *Travels*, p 212. London, Oxford University Press, 1968.
- 2 Madame Sévigné, *Lettres Choisies*, p 69. Paris, Librairie Larousse.
- 3 Madariaga, S, *Essays with a purpose*. London, Hollis and Carter, Ltd, 1954.
- 4 Christy, N P, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1979, **300**, 979.
- 5 Pruitt, R D, *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 1979, **54**, 64.
- 6 Abrahamson, S, *Journal of Medical Education*, 1978, **53**, 951.
- 7 Pascal, *Pensées et Opuscules*, p 34. Paris, Librairie Larousse.