

Letter from . . . Chicago

Winter's tales

GEORGE DUNEA

February on the banks of Lake Michigan, depressing even during a remarkably mild winter, is a time to dream of the hibiscus and the oleander. Hence the attraction of a trip to the southern hemisphere—any excuse will do—and even 22 hours in the air pass pleasantly in the enjoyment of such companions as Anthony Trollope and Luciano Pavarotti. And what a delight to meet again the dear Lady Arabella, not ill but still a patient, not enjoying life any less for keeping to her bed and swallowing daily doses, for: "It suited her turn of mind to be an invalid and to have a doctor; and as the doctor whom her good fates had placed at her elbow thoroughly understood her case, no great harm was done."¹ Harmless also, on the screen, was the brief romance between Giorgio, the renowned Italian tenor, and the shrewd pretty Bostonian throat specialist, for, like Doctor Thorne, she also thoroughly understood his case. Diagnosing his sudden incapacitating aphonia as hysterical, she promptly cured him with a painful injection in the rump, so that he would rise to new heights and bring the house down with his "Nessum dorma"—none shall sleep.

And few indeed slept in Melbourne on the first day of the Year of the Pig—at least among the Chinese community—for there was a raucous parade with drums and trumpets and colourful streamers flying through the air, the parties went on well into the night, and the crowds at the Kung Fu cinema applauded as the great swordsmen overcame some 50 hapless foes at a time before walking away from a heap of bodies. More difficult to subdue were the elements in this sultry dignified city that boasts an excellent art gallery and a new concert hall picturesquely overlooking the river Yarra. The sun bore down mercilessly on the stately wide streets, on which old trams, wisely left in place, provide an excellent means of public transport. A fierce brown sandstorm from the outback suddenly blew over the city, reducing visibility to nought and stopping the traffic dead. Then came the terrible bushfires, which spread for hundreds of miles along the southern part of the continent, causing great loss of life and property. By comparison the problems identifiable in Sydney were minor.

The government has at last carried out its threat against the venerable Sydney Hospital, moving to downgrade it to a casualty station with some 120 beds, all in the name of economy, planning, and regionalisation. It now costs \$90 to be caught driving without seat belts and much more to be apprehended driving with a blood alcohol concentration of 50 mg/100 ml (10.8 mmol/l), which after all amounts to only two middies—a real disaster in this beer drinking city, threatening to ruin a prosperous industry in a state that suffers already from too much unemployment. Then came the elections and the triumph for the Labour party, leaving many people doubtful about the future—especially the doctors, already at odds with the government over fees, prerogatives, and regulations. But at night in the

opera house by the harbour Sutherland sings Handel, Romeo and Juliet conduct their immortal romance in French, while English quite adequately conveys Don Alfonso's prejudice that women are lovely but forever fickle.

A trail of human distress

Back in America and its mild winter—that is until the first day of spring brought six inches of snow—we find not dissimilar preoccupations. The economy may be getting healthier, in part by courtesy of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), but meanwhile the recession has left a trail of human distress. Thus we read that the state of California, originator of the famous tax cutting proposition, is flat broke and issuing IOU notes instead of money. In Sacramento the county has stemmed the flood of new applications for welfare by setting up a poorhouse in the best tradition of Mr Bumble with his cocked hat and gold laced cuffs. Only men are accepted; married couples, parents of young children, handicapped persons, or non English speaking aliens will continue to receive their \$190 per month, a form of discrimination that has raised questions about the constitutionality of the scheme. Meanwhile the men live in their barracklike dormitories and are kept to a strict routine, with breakfast at 6 am, bedcheck at 9 pm, evening prayers twice weekly, and an Alcoholics Anonymous session once weekly. Seven days a month they cut grass or pick up litter for the council, and they must attend at least 10 interviews a month and document why they were not hired.

Other states are also short of money, and in Illinois the governor wants to raise taxes to keep social services going. In Chicago some 20 000 homeless people wander about the streets, sleeping in carparks or empty buildings, in cardboard boxes, under bridges, or in police cells. Some seek shelter in missions, "crawling with body lice and street thugs," where people overflow onto the bathroom floors and the newcomers get to sleep under the urinals. Conditions are Spartan; the day starts at 4 am with the pounding of a bell summoning the sinners to prayers and lights go out at 10 30 pm, after which there is no smoking or talking or you get put out. Among the homeless drifters are the mentally ill—in growing numbers, as all but 9000 of Illinois's 40 000 psychiatric patients have been set free in the past 15 years, some released after 20 years of institutionalisation into a world they cannot understand or cope with. Funds for community workers are also being cut, so many receive no outpatient treatment either, but drift aimlessly; we read about one confused patient, "his skin black with grime, his hair crawling with lice," who, after repeated scrubbings by the social workers, surprised everybody by turning out to have fair hair and a light complexion.

Another consequence of the recession has been the loss of hospital treatment and medical benefits for some 11 million people who lost their insurance with their jobs, and also for the many medically indigent (Medicaid) patients whose names were taken off the welfare rolls. Increasingly, these patients have no

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choice at times of sickness but to return to the old county hospitals with their overcrowded emergency rooms. Yet this safety net designed to care for the poor is now being stretched to the utmost, especially as private hospitals can no longer afford to provide millions of dollars in free care. We read, then, how patients long accustomed to easy access, personalised care, identifiable doctors, and reasonably short waits are shocked and frustrated when they try to use the system of medical care operated by the counties. They face long delays in getting appointments, long waits to be seen, shortages of drugs and appliances, and much confusion as they are being shunted from clinic to clinic—a return to the bad days of the '60s before the Medicaid legislation did away with some of the worst aspects of charity medicine.

Overworked and underappreciated occupations

Meanwhile, closing so many private hospital beds has put an end to the nursing shortage. Gone are the days when hospital officials went on recruiting trips, offering finders fees and even trips to Hawaii. Whereas in 1980 there was a national shortage of some 100 000 nurses hospitals now have waiting lists, as many married part time nurses work full time, often because their husbands are unemployed. Hospitals have laid off staff, have asked their nurses to take one day off without pay each month, and in one hospital the staff turnover has gone down from 37% to 1% within two years. But problems of maldistribution remain, with persisting shortages in rural areas, in inner city hospitals, and in some specialties. The nursing schools are responding by training less students, and some expect that the shortage may return if the economy improves, especially if nursing continues to be perceived as an overworked, underpaid, and underrespected occupation. This is the subject of a chapter well worth reading in Lewis Thomas's newest book, and I can do no better than to quote the closing statement: "Knowing what I know, I am all for the nurses. If they are to continue their professional feud with the doctors, if they want their professional status enhanced and their pay increased, if they infuriate the doctors by their claims to be equal professionals, if they ask for the moon, I am on their side".²

Another occupation, traditionally overworked and underappreciated, is that of the housewife. Not that the escape into the world of business, with its stresses and rigid hours, is necessarily a panacea; I clearly remember years ago the mistress of the house leaving home at 7 am to trudge through the snow to the station, while the lady hired to take care of the house would settle down by the fire, make a cup of tea, and relax with a cigarette before undertaking the day's tasks. But be that as it may, last December some 15 wives in Rhode Island went on strike, claiming their husbands showed insufficient respect, affection, or appreciation for a "slave who is on call 24 hours per day." As they went on picketing instead of cooking, cleaning, or cuddling they received letters of support from all continents, but also some obscene calls. The dispute was settled to their satisfaction, and one wife subsequently reported getting so much attention she did not know what to do. In a similar incident a mother went on strike against her children, to remind them that she was a human being and needed a little affection. "They forget to talk to me. They forget to kiss me. They didn't think of me as a person. They thought of me as a mother and therefore, as someone who owes them something." The strike lasted for six days, until the last of the children agreed to sign a list of demands, including that mother should not be considered a taxi driver, loan officer, or 24-hour cook, and that the children be considerate and say thank you.

Dealing with drunken driving

Meanwhile, teenagers have also been the subject of a controversy about drunken driving, because some three million youths

between the ages of 14 and 17 have problems with alcohol and 6% of high school seniors drink daily. As teenagers constitute 8% of all drivers but account for 15% of drunken driving incidents, many states are considering raising the age limit for drinking to 21. Already 16 states have done so, and a move to have similar legislation enacted by the other 34 states has been supported by the American Medical Association, the National Transportation Safety Board, and the bartenders' union. Such a move would also eliminate the problem of thirsty teenagers crossing from one state to another, as is the case in Illinois, for example, where the age limit has been 21 for two years causing many people to drive into Wisconsin, where there is a more liberal age limit of 18.

It is further estimated that alcohol is responsible for more than half of the nation's almost 50 000 yearly deaths from motorcar accidents. Many states are now considering implementing tougher laws on drunken driving, and in February the US Supreme Court moved to fight what it called "the carnage caused by drunken drivers" by upholding the states' right to use refusal to submit to an alcohol test as presumptive evidence of intoxication. The case had arisen when a man from South Dakota had been supported by local courts on grounds of self incrimination in his refusal to submit to such a test because, unable to walk in a straight line, he had argued he was too drunk to pass the test. The federal government has likewise spent millions of dollars in its fight to stop the "killing and maiming" connected to alcohol abuse, offering, among other things, grants to states meeting four criteria—namely, that drivers found to have blood alcohol concentrations in excess of 100 mg/100 ml should automatically be considered drunk; that first offenders should lose their licences for 90 days; that second offenders must be sentenced to at least two days in jail or 10 days of community service; and that efforts be made to enforce the laws and further public education. In Chicago judges have often been notoriously lenient in their approach to drunken drivers, prompting the state to propose new legislation, including a 30 day jail sentence for people driving with suspended or revoked licences, and stiffer penalties for repeat offenders. And from Los Angeles comes the news of a programme allowing convicted drivers to serve their mandatory 48 hours' sentence in civilised suburban prisons rather than with the hardened criminals of the overcrowded county jail, provided that they agree to pay a fee of \$75 a night for room and board. The prisoners are expected to clean their cells and wash the windows but may eat their TV dinners in the privacy of their solitary quarters. They may with advantage follow the stoic philosopher's precepts and retire into themselves, noting, however, that on occasions it seems permissible to "go as far as intoxication" and "banish dull sobriety for a while," for wine "liberates the mind from its bondage to care" and "sometimes it is jolly to be mad"³—though not in a vehicle moving at 100 km per hour.

References

- 1 Anthony Trollope. *Framley parsonage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976:420.
- 2 Lewis Thomas. *The youngest science*. New York: Viking Press, 1983:67.
- 3 Hadas M (translator). *The stoic philosophy of Seneca*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958:105-6.

What is womb music?

The baby in utero is surrounded by sounds such as the maternal heart beat, bowel sounds, and possibly others. It is stated that the playing of similar rhythmic sounds to crying babies allows them to sleep because this brings back the peaceful "music" of the womb, to which they have become conditioned.—HUGH JOLLY, consultant paediatrician, London.