

---

## Letter from. . . Chicago

---

### Dog days

George Dunea

The new interns arrive on the first day of July. They are herded into a large auditorium and overwhelmed for eight hours with detailed instructions that they cannot possibly remember and platitudes that they have all heard before. They must work hard, learn a lot, sharpen their skills, strive to be complete persons, have fun, and become members of the team. They are given a titillating description of the great beauties of the American landscape: cost containment, the need for documentation, quality assurance, managed care, peer review, malpractice, utilisation review, and interdisciplinary rounds. They are then taken to the wards and told to draw blood.

This is the time of the year when anybody who knows anything about teaching hospitals makes an effort to stay away. The patients try to reschedule their coronary thromboses. The wise hospital superintendents of olden days went on vacation. But modern scientists prefer to collect data to quantify this July phenomenon. Recently they studied 2589 patients and found nothing wrong. Then they studied another 21 679 patients and merely discovered that at this time of the year they stayed in hospital on average half a day longer. It seems that nobody died needlessly and that "it is OK to get sick in July." In the face of this overwhelming statistical evidence on site observers may have to refrain in the future from describing the July changeover by such alarming epithets as harrowing, tumultuous, or cataclysmic.

This summer also witnessed an attempt to correct the federal budget deficit. The president and congress leaders met daily but agreed on nothing, not even on ending illogical programmes such as subsidising tobacco growing. Then the gulf crisis dispelled the

romantic notion of raising money by taxing oil imports. With oil on everybody's mind, and on many beaches as well, the Food and Drug Administration turned against fish oil. It was all right to take it, the administration said, if you didn't mind a "fishy burp" and paying \$1000 a year. But it was not acceptable, it had already decided some time ago, to claim that fish oil could cure migraine, arthritis, diabetes, eczema, psoriasis, hypertension, and cancer. Recently, and despite a British study presenting evidence to the contrary, the administration has also forbidden manufacturers to claim that fish oil could cure heart disease. It also has new proposals on labelling grocery products, eliminating the blurb about vitamins, and requiring the use of standard serving sizes. According to the new proposals, hailed as a major step forward, cholesterol free foods must contain less than 2 mg of cholesterol and less than 5 gm of fat per serving. Low cholesterol will mean less than 20 mg per serving. Data on saturated and unsaturated fat, fibre, cholesterol, carbohydrate, and sodium will have to be expressed as a percentage of what is contained in a 2350 calorie diet, allowing appropriate extrapolations for dieters.

#### Knife happy surgeons

Meanwhile the health bureaucrats persist in assessing quality of care by mortality rates, publishing volumes of useless data in defiance of common sense and now also of a study by the Rand Corporation that is "somewhere between cautious and extremely sceptical" about the value of this exercise. More helpful might be the information that in some suburban hospitals in Chicago 37% of all babies were delivered by a caesarean

Cook County Hospital,  
Chicago, Illinois  
George Dunea, FRCP,  
attending physician

*Br Med J* 1990 301 1149-50

section. This exceeds the national or state averages of about 23%, and also contrasts with inner city rates of 11 to 15%. Some authorities thought that 15% was reasonable, blaming fear of being sued, convenience, and other motives for the higher rates. Then data collectors studied 6000 hysterectomies on women under 40 in Illinois and concluded that one third were unnecessary. Gynaecologists expressed scepticism, consumerists accused surgeons of greed, insurance companies advocated second or even third opinions, and a newspaper thundered about unnecessary surgery, urging hospitals to keep a sharp eye on knife happy surgeons.

The newspapers also kept the public enthralled with tales about the American Medical Association. They told about excessive salaries for AMA executives and questionable loans, consulting contracts and payments to pension plans. This led to the resignation of the AMA's chief executive officer and caused widespread unrest among the membership. An editorial in the association's journal about doctors afflicted by the greed virus did not help matters. The virus spread to Illinois, where doctors paying \$800 a year for unified membership in local and national societies moved to disaffiliate and in the process keep the change. This proposal was eventually shelved, as was one to muzzle the editor by having a committee censor "doctor bashing editorials." Since then the trustees have promised to turn over a new leaf, vowing that financial irregularities will never happen again. But many doctors remain doubtful. Only 44% belong to the AMA, and some think that the association should spend less time tending to its real estate holdings and more standing up for the doctors in these troubled times.

At about this time a report suggested that surgeons suffering from AIDS could safely operate on patients without transmitting the virus. This was based on experience with a Nashville surgeon who had operated on over 2000 patients in three hospitals without infecting any of them. But hardly had the nervous public received these reassuring tidings that the news broke about a woman who inexplicably contracted AIDS after having two teeth pulled by a dentist infected with HIV. According to the mystified investigators, there was no other explanation of how this woman could have acquired the disease. The dental association criticised as premature the release of the news, saying that the case was inconclusive and had been incompletely investigated. But many patients cancelled their dental appointments and the thundering newspaper called for new guidelines and for an even

shaper eye to be kept on the doctors. Had they not, after all, misdiagnosed Vincent Van Gogh as being psychotic and epileptic when in fact he merely cut off his ear to stop the intolerable tinnitus of Meniere's disease—at least according to recent reinterpretations.

#### **"New" disease of measles**

Also this summer at a delicatessen shop in Chicago 27 customers caught hepatitis A. Investigators closed the shop and destroyed the food, two store employees were tested positive for hepatitis A. Needless to say, the victims are suing the store for negligence. Then a larger outbreak, of measles, had young doctors rush to their textbooks to relearn the four K's—Koplik spots, cough, coryza, and conjunctivitis. Many had not seen measles before, and indeed one case was thought at first to be toxic shock. The doctors were also surprised to see how deathly ill people could become from this disease. Within five years the number of measles in the United States has risen from 1400 to more than 14 000 a year, the cases occurring because vaccination had been omitted or been ineffective. In Chicago, where many cases occurred in the very young, the health department has lowered the immunisation age from 15 to 12 months, as well as requiring all students to present valid vaccination certificates before being allowed to attend classes.

The public has now also learnt from the medical literature via the daily press that growth hormone injections given three times weekly to men aged 61 to 81 made them younger, stronger, and more muscular. Postmenopausal women may develop less osteoporosis and break fewer bones if they take hormones or editronate. The small town of Palestine in Texas now has its own syndrome, also known as the STAR complex, representing an unexplained outbreak of sore throat, temperature, arthritis, and rash. Epidemics of salmonellosis continue to occur and are being traced to infected tomatoes. The American Bar Association voted to adopt a neutral stance on abortion, but an Illinois study suggests that as many as 1% of male divorce lawyers make sexual advances to their female clients during the vulnerable period while their cases are pending. Men produce less sperm during the hot sultry dog days, this apparently accounting for fewer babies being born in the spring. And a dog fight has broken out in Iowa, with lawyers fighting over money, custody, and visitation rights, after a woman left most of her \$12 000 estate to her four beloved cats to provide them with life long care in a suitably compassionate institution.