

It's a funny old life

John Earle with encouragement and helpful comments from Fiona

I admit to a mind that is a bit like a sandy beach. The tide of newspapers, television, books, conversation and observation bring in oddities that remain on the beach with no effort. Where I left my spectacles or the car keys is a different story!

Hitherto unpublished letters to The Daily Telegraph have now been printed under the title of "Am I alone in thinking." They have been brilliantly edited by Iain Hollingshead ISBN 9781 84513 5027.

Here are two examples. "SIR, I recently received a spam e-mail asking if I wanted to marry "a hot Russian chick." As I'm approaching 75 years of age and have blood pressure problems, I decided on this occasion not to accept this tempting offer." Another was "SIR, If a member of the House of Lords is involved in a same sex marriage, what is the correct form of address for the partner? Assuming that neither has been christened Gaylord."

An article in The Times mentioned that the Government has decided not to produce an Information Technology (IT) scheme that covered the entire N.H.S. I believe it was described as "Surplus to requirements" as if it existed. A few years ago over twenty professors wrote an open letter to the Government saying that the scheme was not workable. The scheme does not exist and the cost to date is twenty billion pounds.

A recent television programme referred to tidal surges that are likely to threaten London and the flood plain near the mouth of the Thames if the sea level rises due to climate change. An improved Thames barrier would cost ten billion pounds. We wonder how accurately future figures can be forecast. From a distant memory, Tony Blair was quoted 2.5 billion for the IT scheme.

A Times article told how a Captain in The Royal Army Veterinary Corps is holding

monthly clinics near Camp Bastion for animals (mainly sheep and goats) belonging to farmers in this remote area. His de-lousing and de-worming programmes are going well and will lead to improved qualities of meat and better human nutrition.

The Captain mentioned that the locals had no knowledge of veterinary science. Don't scoff at their ignorance. As recently as the early years of the 19th century, when steam-driven coaches were being driven between Paddington and Edgware at speeds up to 20 m.p.h., we believed that infectious disease was due to vapour rising from the marshes called "The Miasma."

An illustrated broadsheet published by East and North Hertfordshire N.H.S. is called "Your guide to local health services." Naturally I looked to see what services GPs were supposed to provide. I quote "GPs offer a number of services such as vaccinations, health screenings, smear tests, chronic condition management and referrals to other health services and social services." Patients with acute medical emergencies such as tonsillitis, ear infections, chest infections or urinary infections are given no advice. There is no obvious mention of contraception. Patients with minor injuries should go to the nearest minor injuries unit in St Albans or Bishop's Stortford or there are Urgent Care Centres in Hertford or Cheshunt.

Twenty five years ago, when I was in practice, we dealt with the problems I mentioned. It all seemed simpler. Nowadays, we seem to be in an era when specialists are thought to be very important and generalists seem to be downgraded. I am certainly biased, but when a patient seems to have more than one illness, it is important to realise what is happening. If specialist advice is needed, obviously it is helpful to refer the patient to the appropriate person. Specialists are expected to know all the answers but

generalists may have to live in doubt and so keep an open mind. Perhaps I am looking back through rose tinted spectacles, but I did know our local consultants as did many colleagues and I felt we worked together for the benefit of our patients.

NHS Direct offers advice about what to do if you are feeling unwell. It sounds great, but all illnesses have a beginning and they often start by a patient feeling "Just not quite right"; part of the art of medicine lies in spotting serious illness in the early stages and making the appropriate referral, without the benefit of any test results. This is particularly important in young children and the elderly.

Crude death rates in hospitals have been published, also the delay in getting treatment for cancers or heart attacks. I have never seen any reference to the delay in getting patients with acute illness into the appropriate hospital bed.

The Times recently ran a wonderful article about the bonus culture coming to Hundred Acre Wood. Rabbit began it by talking to Pooh about performance-related honey. Pooh answered thoughtfully, "You mean if I invented more hums, went on more expotitions and hunted more heffalumps, I would get more honey." "Precisely" said Rabbit, looking like a company chairman with two board meetings and three takeovers to complete that day.

Piglet was offered performance-related haycoms and even Eeyore was prepared to give it a go when he was offered extra thistles as well as his basic pay thistles. He might also receive variable thistles, long-term incentive thistles and thistle options. In character, Eeyore said, "But I don't suppose it will work."

Tigger bounced with pleasure when he heard he might earn more extract-of-malt. Owl approved and used a lot of long words like incentivisation and top-quartile rewards and the importance of the Blacksh-Owls formula. Everyone knew that

Owl had brains. Finally, Christopher Robin agreed to the idea.

Pooh was sad that Tigger no longer had time to play with him as he was trying to hit his bounce target. Pooh couldn't find words to go with more hums. As he had already found the North Pole, he decided to find the West Pole, but expotitions were not much fun alone.

Coming back through the Forest, Pooh noticed that five of the Six Pine Trees and half the Forest had been flattened by Tigger's excessive bouncing. So too had Eeyore's Gloomy Place. However Tigger did have a huge pile of jars containing extract-of-malt.

Pooh said to Christopher Robin, "Can we go back to the old way please?" Christopher Robin replied, "Silly old bear. Of course we can". But can we?

Finally, we recently saw a television programme about the Turin shroud. This probably does date back to the time of Christ. The carbon dating that was carried out maybe twenty years ago was incorrect as the tests were done on a sample of the shroud that was a repair rather than from the main shroud.

