

NHS our religion?

Diamond celebrations are past, but 'The National Health Service is the closest thing the English have to a religion' (Nigel Lawson 1992) remains relevant. In 1976 Barbara Castle said the NHS was 'the nearest thing to the embodiment of the Good Samaritan that we have' while by 1999 Julia Neuberger was more reflective: 'Like theological belief, belief in the NHS rests on assertions, apparently revealed truths - and woe betide those who try to say otherwise'. Eutyachus most enjoyed J B S Haldane's 1964 'Thanks to the nurses and Nye Bevan, The NHS is quite like heaven'. (*BMJ* 2008; 337:26)

Stem cells and humour

While work on induced pluripotent stem cells advances apace around the world, another possible source of embryonic-like stem cells caused Professor Robin Lovell-Badge of the National Institute for Medical Research to joke. A project at King's College London had used 22 samples from testicular biopsies or medical castrations and had derived pluripotent cells. The professor commented 'An answer to how these...cells can be used will have to be left dangling a little longer'.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7659120.stm>)

Sperm and consent

A woman is battling to use sperm taken from her dead husband. He died unexpectedly during routine surgery in 2007, and sperm obtained *post mortem* is now stored. Because the law only allows sperm to be used with written donor consent, she went to court to seek permission for use. The judge ruled 'I am not satisfied that it is possible to lawfully remove, or authorise the removal of gametes (sperm or eggs) from a dead person, who has not given an effective advanced consent to this'. The HFEA welcomed the ruling, which confirmed their decision.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/7659430.stm>)

IVF births up

The world's first IVF baby, Louise Brown, turned 30 this year, and latest IVF statistics show more successes than ever. In 2006 there were 10,242 births resulting in 12,596 babies, a 13% rise on the number of births the year before. Success rates per treatment started rose to 23%, while in 1992 when the regulator started collecting data the live birth rate was 13%. These statistics were announced as the HFEA launched its 'Find a Clinic' website.

(<http://guide.hfea.gov.uk/guide>)

Cyclebeads - natural family planning

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, has perhaps belatedly supported a form of natural family planning with the launch of 'Cyclebeads'. These consist of a string of plastic beads, each colour-coded to represent a different day in a woman's menstrual cycle. The day she starts her period, she puts a rubber ring on a red bead and then moves it forward following an arrow, one day at a time. She can thus confine intercourse to days of low pregnancy likelihood. (www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=1111)

Assisted suicide in Spain?

The Spanish health minister announced that end of life care is due for an overhaul, and that legalising assisted suicide might be proposed. His comments appeared in an article headlined 'Your body is yours - that is socialist' and included 'Spain may end up with legislation similar to that in Switzerland or the Netherlands'. A spokesman for the opposition Popular Party said 'The Socialists have renounced palliative care. They don't talk any more about a dignified death: they talk about assisted suicide.' (*BMJ* 2008; 337:a1697)

The Grim Reaper's road map

Staying with death, but natural death this time - ghoulishly titled to attract attention, an atlas of mortality in Great Britain has been published. Sheffield and Bristol University researchers analysed almost 15 million death records from 1981-2004 to depict geographical variations. Eutyachus notes that death, like Time, is often shown with a scythe... (*BMA News* 2008; 25 October:6)

Homoeopaths on the warpath

The *BMJ* published a letter from Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at Peninsula Medical School, complaining that since his book critically evaluating the evidence for homoeopathy and other alternative treatments had come out, 'UK homoeopaths have been engaging in an elaborate campaign of multiple letter writing, repeatedly invoking the Freedom of Information Act to harass and silence me. This letter shows that they have failed.' Ernst continued 'What is at stake here is our right, I would argue our duty, to speak out against misleading claims and dangerous concepts. We should find ways of protecting ourselves against such enemies of reason.' (*BMJ* 2008; 337:a2063)

Can faith in God relieve pain?

The *Daily Telegraph* reported Oxford University research that gave electric shocks to 12 Roman Catholics and 12 atheists as they were having their brains MRI-scanned and as they viewed Sassoferrato's 17th century religious painting *Virgin Mary* and da Vinci's 15th century secular painting *Lady with an Ermine*. The Catholics reported 12% less pain with the former, and the scanner indicated engagement of neural mechanisms of pain modulation. Neither painting had any such effect on the atheists. Eutyachus remains sceptical about any grand conclusions and wonders how Protestant volunteers might have fared. (www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/3096743/Belief-in-God-really-can-relieve-pain.html)

Getting it out of the system

In an article exploring why so many doctors became famous writers (Conan Doyle, Chekhov, Keats, Somerset Maugham) Erin Sullivan, who helps teach the MA in history of medicine at UCL, is reported as suggesting writing may be an outlet for the emotions doctors confront professionally. 'Medicine is now part of the sciences, but it still has a lot to do with people, and how they make sense of events in their lives.' What a privilege medicine is. (*BMA News* 2008; 4 October:15)