

Editorial

Memories

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Arthur Dent, reeling from Earth's recent demolition, discovers that its only other survivor, his friend Ford Prefect, wasn't actually from Guilford, as he had claimed previously, but from a small planet, somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse¹. Ford went on to explain that he had been sent for a week to Earth as a researcher for The Guide, but had been inadvertently stranded here for fifteen years. Prior to this, The Guide's singular citation for Earth had been 'harmless'. Ford reassured Arthur that he had, in the intervening sojourn, extensively refined and improved it. The citation now read, 'mostly harmless'.¹ Silencing Arthur's outrage, Ford explained that there were a hundred billion stars in the Galaxy and not much space in the book. As I get older, medicine and my mind seem like that.

Because medicine's canon is so vast, the quantity of information that one is required to process and retain is both phenomenal and ever changing. I would propose that a memory system is advantageous. For example, in this edition we consider such vital but disparate subjects as the current treatment of atrial fibrillation, and the formal requirement for bespoke and tailored IV fluid solutions, to name but two. One such method that could be used to memorise these was proposed by Simonides of Ceos, and first recorded in Cicero's *De Oratore*.

Simonides was born in 556 BC on the Island of Ceos, in the Aegean Archipelago. Simonides was a polymath; a musician, poet and writer. He was also the inventor of a revolutionary system for memory enhancement. At a dinner given by a patron, Scopas, he had been required to briefly leave the building to meet two men but while there, the edifice collapsed, killing everyone and disfiguring them beyond recognition. Simonides was able to remember, by each's position (locus), who had been there. This would become the *Method of Loci*, also called the *Memory Palace* or *Journey Method*. This memory system was still in widespread use in Europe until the Renaissance. Essentially, one 'walks' in one's mind through a familiar building, a Cathedral was commonly employed, mentally placing the items one wishes to remember at strategic places along the route. By mentally retracing the steps, one can retrieve everything that one has placed there. This method fell out of favour after the Reformation, but vestigial remnants remain in the English language when, for example, one says, 'in the first place'; 'in the second place' and so on.

This Memory Palace method is a form of mnemonic strategy. Various auditory ('peg' lists) and visual ('egg and spear' lists) mnemonic systems are in common usage. Common to many

is an enhanced spatial learning strategy and this involves the medial parietal cortex, retrosplenial cortex and hippocampus. Essentially, we remember pictures more easily than we do words.

EPICUREAN DELIGHTS

The Greek philosopher Epicurus founded a school of philosophy based on the twin concepts of a fear-free, peaceful existence (ataraxia) and freedom from pain (aponia). Nowadays, there is a tendency for Epicureanism to be tainted with hedonistic over fondness for earthly pleasures, but in fact there was an underlying understanding by them of balance and appreciation in all that they did and enjoyed. As Seneca would observe, those who aren't happy with a little can never be happy with a lot. Fiona Stewart channels this notion in the Bookcase section with her selection of six culinary works. Thought for food and food for thought.

Our Grand Rounds and Review sections have been gratifyingly popular. It seemed right within this educational context to consider another, more visual, section: a pictorial review. Again, we shall concentrate on subjects that might be considered to be of general interest. Barry James has produced the first on the abdominal radiograph. If you have suggestions for others, please do let me know.

POSTSCRIPT

My first editorial included some verse by Seamus Heaney. I shall conclude now with a fragment of his visual memory, recalled from an Autumnal County Clare. One had the sense that with his passing many on this Island paused momentarily to remember. Between his finger and thumb the squat pen rested. He dug with it.

*The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans...*

*You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.*

Please do keep sending me your good papers.

Barry Kelly

Honorary Editor

REFERENCES

1. Adams D. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. London. Pan.1992.
2. Heaney S. *Postscript*. Opened Ground. London. Faber and Faber. 1998. 444p



The Northern Ireland Medico-Legal Society

Membership is open to members of the medical and legal professions, and those with a professional interest in medico-legal subjects.

The Society is always keen to attract new members. There is a small annual subscription. Lectures are normally held four times a year, on Tuesday evenings at 6.30pm, in The Canada Room at Queen's University, followed by a reception and buffet supper in The Great Hall. The social aspect is an integral part of the society.

Meetings cover a wide range of subjects. Some recent examples of speakers and topics are listed below.

The Princess Diana and Dodi Inquest: Rt Hon Lord Justice Scott Baker

Ministers and Mandarins: Lord Waldegrave, Eton Provost, past Cabinet Minister.

The Living Will: Prof Raymond Tallis, Physician and Philosopher

Obstetric Litigation: Lessons learnt, Sir Sabarat Arulkumaran

Psychiatric morbidity in Prisons: Prof Harry Kennedy

Children control our Destiny: Prof Sheena Lewis, Dept of Reprogenetics

Air Crash Investigations: Nicholas Dann, Snr Air Accident Inspector.

Ivan Illich: Medical Nemesis Revisited: Emeritus Prof Sidney Lowry

The Ryan Report on Clerical Abuse: The Hon Mr Justice Ryan

The Society has reciprocity with The Irish Medico-Legal Society in Dublin. Recently a successful joint meeting at Áras an Uachtaráin was hosted by former President Mary McAleese on:

Medicine, Law and Human Rights

A return joint meeting is planned in Belfast for April 2014 on

Big Pharma: Trials and Tribulations

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