

Editorial

SORROW AND LOSS – A WORLD IN TURMOIL

Deeply felt sadness and a questioning sense of premature loss must surely be the overriding sentiments that currently dominate the College, and all its members and fellows around the world. On the 31st August, Professor Jim Petrie, our recent President, passed away after a very short illness against which modern medicine was totally impotent in curing or palliating. Although not having reached the beginning of his sixth decade, he had packed into his professional lifetime a gamut of internationally recognised, and eminently worthwhile and practical achievements: even though the many more years in which he could still have made further impact were denied to him, he has left behind a memorial that cannot easily be emulated or surpassed.

This pre-eminent physician achieved consultant rank at the age of 29 years, and was appointed to a chair in pharmacology at the age of 44. As a direct result of the activities and innovations that he generated throughout his career he literally revolutionised the philosophy of clinical medicine and the basic rationale behind patient treatment. He led from the front by hard work and was blessed with an inexorable stamina. Jim carefully thought out his ideas ensuring that they were solidly based and closely argued, and then went on to convince and inspire others with his exuberant enthusiasm. His extraordinary intellect and intelligence shone like a beacon to those around him who were not as gifted, and as to be expected, he had no time for frippery and nonsense but expected commitment and hard work. As with every 'doctor' worth his salt, he enjoyed teaching, and gently, but in a determined manner, prodded undergraduates and postgraduates to work out for themselves treatment regimens and basic pathology; he championed their rights and ensured that their years of training were indeed what they were billed to be. His research was incisive and *avant-garde*, and the many clinical trials that he planned and executed were of significant importance in such matters as the treatment of hypertension and chronic cardiac conditions. Above all, in all that he sought to achieve, he placed the patient at the centre of medicine with all revolving around him ensuring that his voice was heard and that his care was paramount.

If one had to pick on just two of the fundamental and revolutionary notions that he put forward, these must surely be the institution of problem-orientated records and ensuring that all treatment was based on solid 'best' evidence. Each individual patient's 'journey of care' must be appropriately charted and developed; when basic information was lacking, he set out on a quest to ensure that such evidence was sought and discovered. The underlying fundamental concept of the duty of care to the patient was the establishment of an intimate and mutually supportive partnership between the patient and his carers. All patient-directed care had to be brought under scrutiny, and this meant primary care as much as hospital care and community care; it meant nursing and paramedical involvement as well as the pharmacological and surgical

manipulations intended to sort out the underlying pathological processes; it encompassed preventative medicine and the setting up of screening investigations. This was indeed the background to his adherence to problem-orientated clinical record keeping with the guiding principle being a holistic approach to the patient as an individual person with unique requirements, anxieties and aspirations, which had to be considered carefully and always taken into full account. Whatever was done had to be subject to scrutiny and audit to enable best practice to be identified and more widely adopted.

His crowning achievement must surely be the setting up, and the progressive and continued thriving, of the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN). Over the years many different diseases or other common medical complaints have been selected, and the management and treatment regimens for each of them were carefully dissected and painstakingly studied through a balanced consideration and appropriate evaluation of the totality of available knowledge that has been published in the medical literature. The conclusions and recommendations, which are eventually set down, are therefore not solely a compromise consensus, but a valid and genuine distillate of published work that could be defended in terms of well-conducted clinical trials and other clinical evaluations. The eventual adoption of these 50 or so guidelines did not only occur in this country, but also throughout Europe where they were looked at with envy and taken heed of. Within the last few months our previous President chaired meetings of groups of experts from both the World Health Organisation and the Council of Europe, with the ultimate scope, soon to be achieved and realised, of the development of best practice guidelines for medical practitioners in other European countries. As such – as in the many other visits to other continents which he undertook on behalf of the College – he was a major roving ambassador for British medicine and the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, in particular. His fluent command of other languages since childhood was a major asset in this respect.

When Professor Petrie became convinced in his own mind of the correctness of a particular approach, and the need to stand up and be counted against opposition, he did so unreservedly, be that in political, academic or professional circles. In my view, the epitome of this was the co-signing with other Royal Colleges' Presidents, a letter backing to the hilt the policies put forward by the Sutherland Report that had recommended free personal care for the elderly. The proposals promulgated by this document were flying directly in the face of the recommended political stand on this matter at the time. Indubitably, the correct approach was being put forward by the Sutherland Commission, and now was not the time to hide this light of truth under the bushel of expediency, fudge, compromise and political correctness in its intrinsic sense, but to speak openly from a position of authority and

moral justice. This was indeed what Professor Petrie did.

His premature demise reminds one of the musings of psalmist-king in the 90th psalm:

For a thousand years in your sight
 Are as yesterday, now that it is past,
 Or as a watch of the night.
 You make an end of them in their sleep;
 The next morning they are like the changing grass,
 Which at dawn springs up anew,
 but by evening wilts and fades.

In this vein, the Latin motto of the medieval Scottish libertine adopted in his autobiography by the ageing barrister-author, John Mortimer, '*Timor mortis conturbat me*' (the fear of death troubles me) is certainly well worth more than a fleeting thought.

On behalf of all the staff in the Communications and Publications Department of the College, and on behalf of the Editorial Board of *Proceedings*, I would wish to be associated with the many other worldwide tributes of sincere sympathy and deepest condolences to his wife and his family. He has been a great friend, and a kind and understanding mentor of this department, and he is owed a great debt of gratitude by all of us. His valedictory letter when he demitted the presidential office, which he penned to all who had assisted him during his term of office, is yet another example of his perspicacious, frank and sensitive approach.

What if Jim had gone on for another ten years or so? What many more things would he have achieved? The speculative seam of 'what if?' is a rich mine yielding many thoughts and reveries. Somewhat a-kin to this, a fabricated term which has come into my ken over the last week is the collective noun 'whataboutery' – what about this or that event which happened a century ago, or the other nasty incident that took place ten years ago, or yet the other unpleasant matter that took place last week? What about the problems encountered during the term of office under a different government? What about the way you spoke against the proposal I put forward in that meeting? It has been stated that the use of such unpleasant grievances and grudges as a way of justifying retaliation is perhaps one of the fundamental problems which society at large is suffering from, in whichever context and country one wishes to consider this matter. What is taking place today in many a turbulent protest and civil disturbance is but a repercussion, reflection and retaliation for events and historical episodes, which had taken place years or centuries ago. Investigative journalists speaking to protestors on a workers' dispute picket line, or those engaged in a violent public demonstration, or to those firing home-made or precision weapons at their opponents, will be met with a chorus of 'what about': grievances pertaining to times gone by, and to other occasions, and protests, trotted out litany-fashion. These past problems are utilised as a pretext and an immediate explanation for current protestations, behaviour – or misbehaviour. In the interests of righting wrongs and once and for all setting the record right, everything appears to be permissible, including violence on proportions reaching the depravity of ethnic cleansings and genocide.

It was indeed such long memories of unpleasantness, and long nurtured and festering grievances, that have apparently led to the mayhem and chaos of apocalyptic

proportions which took place recently in the United States. This concerted outrageous act of international terrorism has brought revenge to newer unfathomed depths, and perhaps to what was previously thought to be impossible. In addition to their scale and enormity, what made these events even more telling is they were witnessed on our television screens, blow-by-blow, worldwide. In these wantonly callous and unimaginable incidents, literally thousands of civilians, who at the time were actively and peacefully involved in their daily activities and going about their routine work, were summarily attacked and destroyed. The sheer terror of those hurling themselves out of windows in an attempt to escape a death by fire, filled all who watched with hopelessness and grief. The bodies of those involved in this incident were entombed, mutilated, never to be found or identified, in a gigantic funereal pyre of rubble, corrugated metal and dust. Within a matter of minutes, thousands of families were rendered bereaved, orphaned, widowed, and no longer complete and contented. Dreams, aspirations, friendships, partnerships, hopes, ambitions and lives were destroyed and irreversibly snuffed away. The whole fabric of the world was shaken to its very foundations. The words of W. B. Yeats seem particularly appropriate, if not oracular: 'things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world'.¹ The aftershocks of this cataclysmic event have further resulted in many serious repercussions in terms of trade, finance, banking, international law, and much more yet to come. And all of this allegedly is said to be the consequence of differences in ideology, religions and beliefs. The 'first war of the 21st century', like many conflicts before it, can yet again be said to be the direct offspring of religious differences.

In its most basic derivation, religion is meant to be the set of rules, tenets, ordinances and ethical matters that bind ordinary persons subscribing to that specific belief to an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-embracing Supreme Being; *religo* in Latin is 'to bind'. Every religion under the sun has as its foundation the rules that bind mankind to the Deity. One medieval poetic depiction of God was of an avuncular person that lived on a high mountain that overlooked all the valleys, cities and towns of the world; the progress of mankind in its pilgrimage through life was watched from birth to death and helped along; the final destination from all points of the compass was the summit of the mountain. There were many different ways of getting there, with the terrain and gradient of some paths harder than others, but all was aimed towards this summit of perfection, eternal bliss and unswerving peace.

As a direct collorary of fundamental ethical concepts, every doctrine believes in prevention of destruction, in the fostering of hospitality, in the excise of sympathy and kindness to all creatures great and small. Respect for others, and especially the preservation of life, are considered as sacred, and the unlawful taking of the lives of others must surely rank as a totally objectionable anathema in all religions. Yet to many worldwide, and over the centuries of written history, religion appears to have provided a sound, fundamental and sufficiently weighty reason to attack and to destroy property, to maim and to kill – a contradiction in terms, if ever there was one. The Romans persecuted other sects because they failed to worship their pantheon of deities; crusaders travelled on many an expedition from Europe to the East to wage war on sea and land and to enslave those of a non-Christian persuasion. Even within

the countries in which the Christian religion was the dominant force, members of schisms and sects were hunted down, heretics were burnt at the stake, massacres were sanctioned, schisms were smashed by force of arms, and doctrinal non-conformists were made to conform on peril of torture and death. Countries were conquered and laid waste for no other overt reason than religious conversion. It is said when Pius X was asked to bless the Italian armed forces at the commencement of World War I, in a characteristically non-politically correct gesture, he declined most emphatically indicating that it is Peace that he was ordained to serve and he cannot be seen to bless War. Other religious leaders have not been as forthright and as uncompromisingly blunt and true to their beliefs.

Injury often brings into its immediate the need to blame and the concept of swift retaliation against its perpetrators: the eye for an eye and the tooth for a tooth tenet. The teaching of turning the other cheek appears to have its limits and easily transgressed limitations. The larger the insult and injury perpetrated, the lower is the threshold for ignoring this exhortation and bypassing it. No proud sovereign nation can be seen to have suffered loss of face and dignity: the mightiest nation in the world could not be seen to be cowered and humiliated with its citizens massacred and the citadel of its capital city demolished beyond recognition. Indeed, among the initial thoughts of hopelessness and loss in this current disaster came the early call for avenging this absolutely unimaginable, though unbelievably real, atrocity.

A very thin line, however, exists between avenging and revenging, and the transgression of this frontier may lead to recrimination. Events may have ricocheted out of hand; many others are implicated. Violence escalates to even more violence and the initial belligerent outburst may avalanche into an uncontrollable destructive force that cannot be stopped until many further lives, property and democracy will have been irretrievable lost. Diplomacy appears to be totally out of the window and military might is asked to speak. The voice of the gun is shrill and persuasive, but it is short lasting and ineffective in the long term. It cannot be maintained for large swathes of time, and during its duration, it will have notched its toll in untold misery and

unacceptable mortality. Compromise may sound tame, impotent and unmanly, but it is certainly the bedrock of stability and peace. Good must always be seen to prevail ultimately in adversity and destruction.

On a personal level Montaigne, writing in his *Essays* at a time when the world was dominated by war, illness and plague, argues:

I am so fond of ridding myself of the weight of obligations, that I have occasionally counted as gains such attacks or insults or acts of ingratitude as come from those whom, by nature or accident, I owed some duty of affection, taking their offence, as it occurred, as so much towards the settling and discharge of my debt. Even when I continue to pay them the visible courtesies which society requires, I still find it as great saving to do for justice what I used to do for affection and to alleviate a little the inward stress and anxiety of my will.²

Even on a global basis there may be more sense in careful consideration and the adoption of this more tactful and measured philosophy. Compromise, and dare one say it, forgiveness, no matter how grudgingly this is extracted, is certainly the rock of stability and lasting peace. Goodness will have to prevail and be made to triumph and transcend over adversity and destruction.

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day.

John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*³

REFERENCES

- ¹ Yeats WB. *The collected poems of W.B. Yeats*. Wordsworth Editions; 1994.
- ² Montaigne M de. *The complete essays*. London: Penguin; 1993.
- ³ Milton J. *Samson Agonistes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1969.