

Book Case

BOOK REVIEW:

Drife J O. *This Medical Life*. Clinical Press Ltd. Bristol. U.K., 2020.

James Owen Drife is a man of many parts. As Professor of Obstetrics in Leeds he had a distinguished academic career. For many mere mortals that would be a sufficient life-time achievement. He has, however, many more strings to his bow. Author of academic articles, teacher, wit, raconteur, stage performer and after-dinner speaker, to name just a few. "This Medical Life" is a compilation of published articles written by Drife over a period of more than 40 years. Drife, in his author's note says that he "resisted the temptation to tweak the wording or add footnotes." A consequence of that decision is that some of the topics are no longer topical, but the writing is still engaging.

When he was a medical student in Edinburgh Drife participated in student reviews, and later as a postgraduate student, that experience led him, with a group of friends, to participate in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the 1970's. As a complete coincidence, one of his fellow performers was a trainee in neurology in London at the same time as me. (We worked on the same ward.) The book contains an account of their escapades on the Edinburgh Fringe published in the BMJ in 1974 - "Louder and Funnier".

This led to a sequence of humorous short articles, published in "World Medicine" in 1977-8 and then in the "BMJ" in a regular column as "Opinion" from 1988-1990. He was recruited by Stephen Lock who felt that the pages of medical journals lacked humour. The relationship with the BMJ continued when Richard Smith took over as editor. Richard Smith has written an entertaining foreword lauding Drife's injections of humorous wit and wisdom to the pages of his journal. Richard Smith, brother of the comedian Arthur Smith (frequently heard on Radoi 4) is fond of self-deprecating humour.

In about 200 short articles the subject

matter varies widely and ranges from his experiences as a medical student, his shared love of the "Beano" with his wife, interactions with his students, an appreciation of James Robertson Justice's portrayal of Sir Lancelot Spratt, the need for a new section of the House of Lords - "The Lords Medical", "How to Party" and "Seven Guidelines of Wisdom". In this latter article he opines, and I quote - "Today's NHS is constantly seeking novelty. Its jargon has a six-week shelf life. In this context it takes nerve to point out the obvious. Wisdom is old fashioned, but it can be repackaged under a snappy title like Clinical Governance..." He also says "who ever heard of a wise person reading numbered guidelines? Or writing them?" He also has pithy comments on medical educators' attempts to teach wisdom.

My feeling is that information, knowledge and wisdom are concepts entirely different from each other. We live in an age overflowing with information. Many now feel the information available in fractions of a second using an electronic device makes knowledge redundant. (Guidelines are also available on such devices.) Wisdom is a scarce commodity. This little book is overflowing with wisdom, delivered in a fashion that frequently made me, like Richard Smith, laugh out loud.

Stanley Hawkins
Retired Neurologist