

15 September 2015

TAKING TOO MANY CHANCES?

I worry about people's health - it's my job. Last week I mentioned Rod Liddle column in the Sun. He puts himself seriously at risk - and he's been at it again this week. The headline reads: "We need more drones - put me down for a tenner." I'm sure there are any number of fundamentalists who would be only too happy to have him put down free of charge. He also had a go at Charlotte Proudman - and I have to say I agree with him there as she did more damage to the cause of feminism in a trice than anyone else in recent times. Fortunately Marin Alsop the wonderful conductor of the Last Night of the Proms - the first woman to be given this honour (twice) - was able to undo the damage with her eloquent and 'from the heart' message to the Prommers.

He then antagonised Nicola Sturgeon whom RL urged to look her best for a photo-shoot in Vogue by ditching "the Jimmy Krankie look - it was fine for a while but I think its had its day." Peter Bradshaw comes to her defence in the Guardian: "It's a tired, smug, transparently malicious joke that says a great deal more about the speaker than its subject."

To lighten it up a little RL mentions the Norfolk man who is serving time for having a 'roll in the hay' with a horse. His wife is sympathetic - which RL attributes to their 'stable relationship'. It's good to have found someone whose sense of humour is even more puerile the mine!

DEMENTIA (again)

Back in 1958 around 30,000 people all over the world had injections of human growth hormone which was designed to overcome their small stature. The problem was that these patients, mainly children, went on to develop a neurodegenerative condition called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease or CJD because they were infected with a 'prion'.

Emily Underwood, staff writer at Science (sciencemag.org) picks up the story. " Now, a new study of the brains of eight deceased people who contracted CJD from such injections suggests that the injections may also have spread amyloid- β , the neuron-clogging protein that is a hallmark of Alzheimer's disease. The study is the first evidence in humans that amyloid- β might be transmissible through medical procedures such as brain surgery—according to the researchers. Sceptics, however, note that the CJD prion itself often triggers unusual amyloid deposits; epidemiological studies, they say, find no connection between the injections and increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease."

This was a VERY small study - and, as such, the usual caveat applies: "More research is needed" - so watch this space.

I've mentioned a disease in the past a brain-rotting disease called kuru which is endemic to Papua New Guinea. This is also transmitted by a 'prion' (a word you'll remember hearing during the time 'Mad Cow Disease' was in the news.) You get it by consuming human brains at funerals - so my advice is, whenever you go to a funeral and are offered human brains, politely refuse. Even if you're told that Mrs Beeton's recipe has just been updated by Mary Berry and it's simply scrumptious - just say NO!

This is not the first time that an infectious cause has been suggested for Alzheimer's. In the past research has appeared to show, for example, that the incidence is considerably higher in those infected with the Herpes Simplex virus (HSV-1)

GPS ARE IN THE FIRING LINE AGAIN

This time it's because of our role in the processing of applications for gun licences. These days we only seem to be expected to reply to Police enquiries if we know something about the patient that would give us reason to believe the applicant may be the next Adam Lanza or Dylann Storm Roof. Although the critics say: "There are more stringent checks made on bus drivers," maybe that's the right way to go about it in a country with reasonably good gun controls. After all, bus drivers have lives in their hands - and anyone who's seen the film 'Speed' is left with a subliminal fear of what can go wrong when you board a bus. Why, I've seen folk peering under the South Woodham 'Hopper' for suspicious objects - you just can't be too careful these days!

In the old days we were expected to reply to Police enquiries - but how do you phrase your response when you don't know for sure that a patient (who maybe hasn't been to see you for 5 years) isn't going to snap one day and started blasting away randomly at the schoolteacher who gave him a detention for putting a dead frog down the back of Daisy Cornfield's blouse as she sat unknowingly at the desk in front ... or at the GP who refused him a certificate for the time he took off work during the Rugby World Cup having conveniently developed back pain ... or at the dustmen who tipped a bin over outside his house and didn't clear up all the mess ... and at all the innocent people whose only crime was to get in the way when he was on his rampage ... or whatever. In this day and age you have to think how your reply will look when it appears in a summary of the case put together by the tabloids headlined: "Family Doctor gives the go-ahead for Madman to be armed to the teeth."

The task is easy if the person wanting the licence has a long history of some sort of mental illness that is relevant to the application but, all too often, we don't know anything like enough to enable us to say with conviction: "This guy is OK - you can give him a gun licence safe in the knowledge that nothing untoward will ever happen."

This is just one example of forms which ask all sorts of questions to which we don't know the answer - but, over the years, I have groaned like a Dyson being switched off on receiving questionnaires which make enquiries of this nature:

'Please tell us (from your recollection of the medical records - and without seeing or contacting the patient because we don't want to pay you for your time) whether Alice Spriggs can take a shower and dress/undress herself without assistance. I have on occasion written back to say: "Contrary to popular belief, I have never showered with Mrs Spriggs and nor have I dressed/undressed her or been present when she has performed these tasks for herself. By the same token, Mrs Spriggs will not be able to tell you whether or not I can perform these functions unaided.'

Who do they think we are - stalwart members of the local 'Peeping Toms Association'? Do they imagine us creeping through the undergrowth at dusk, periscope and stepladder in hand, intent on glimpsing naked body parts through the bathroom and bedroom windows? Do they think we break off from a consultation to say: "Before we talk about your sore ear, do you see that can of beans I've put on the high shelf over there? Well I want you to take it down, open it with the opener provided, and then pour the contents into this pan whilst I sit and make notes that can be consulted if any public body writes to me seeking this information."

In a 'tick-box' culture, people want to tick their boxes in the quickest, easiest and cheapest way possible. Common sense goes out the window. Perhaps we docs are in part responsible for allowing

this situation to go on ... and on. We connive in the pretence that GPs are 'all seeing and all knowing' - we are happy to perpetuate the myth of omnipotence. Like those who send out the forms, we're unconcerned by the knowledge that nearly all this 'information' is meaningless. If you want to survive in this day and age the rule is: "Anything for an easy life."

Dr John Cormack