

Reflections

Peter Anyon

Gardening is so much easier. I've planted a Putaputaweta outside my kitchen window, and having made sure it was settled in nicely, dug a hole and deeply planted clematis 'Gravetye Beauty', one of the Texensis clan, right next to the trunk of the burgeoning Putaputaweta. Now I'm pretty certain that this Putaputaweta will thrive at the somewhat alarming rate trees seem to grow around here and that each year Gravetye Beauty will flower for four months, the delightful crimson flowers picketing the branches of the tree as they find their way to the sunlight. Easy, it all is. And, the bonus is the beauty of the combination.

Nature may be beautiful, but what of the works of man? Recently H Rainey and myself were asked to provide an 'item' at the annual meeting/dinner of teachers in the abominably named Intensive Training Programme. Since retiring I have found, as have many others, that the world is different. There is time for contemplation, for undertaking new ventures, for sharpening up some long unused skills, and for enjoying both the clematis and perhaps more appropriately, the grandchildren. The clematis have their charms, but it's the grandchildren who keep you young. So I had a bit of time to reflect on the twenty-five years or so since a small group of us founded the General Practitioner Teaching Programme. Three of us still remain, and as I have no idea what the other two think of the current programme, anything I write here about it is all my own thoughts and will undoubtedly be at least partially denied by the others.

When we founded the training programme, we asked ourselves several simple questions. Perhaps the most basic was how we could meas-

ure the success of the programme. This little question could have been attacked, of course, in a variety of ways yet, for better or worse, we decided that we didn't know the answer and perhaps could never know if what we had had the temerity to call a post-graduate training (education) programme would be effective. Would the participants get any more out of it than we old hands got out of our world with no programme to help us, trusting only to the vagaries of self-learning with no directions at all from anyone? Were we going to construct a house of cards rather than a programme? Did we know what to teach? (Of course, the answer to that was that we had little idea). We looked at our own educations, saw where we thought we had failed, recognised which packets of knowledge we lacked and drew up what we regarded from our experience (and with a bit of help), a list of contents for the programme. In short, we constructed a programme with broad outlines similar to that of groups overseas, the ultimate object being to produce a safe doctor. This seemed satisfactory. We recognised that the details of the programme were clearly going to be different from similar ones overseas. Perhaps even some of the principles might turn out to be different, but the general direction of it all would be similar.

Not long after we initiated the programme, some of us had to decide how we could be assured that the participants in the programme had reached the desired standard. Not that we knew what the desiderata were. I

believed then that the participants should acquire at least my standards. The piece of chicanery was vigorously denied by my colleagues. Privately I remained, you'll be interested to know, unrepentant. And still am. Anyway, we founded the examination and the format today is basically similar to what we constructed then. Alterations called 'improvements' have been made. The measurements of the candidates' attempts now appear to be more 'strict' than previously. I presume they are because they are believed to be more measurable. I am unsure about this. But from this more complex and more approved design, are we in fact getting graduates who are 'better' (however you define that), than those of twenty-five years ago? Is all the sophistication worth it?" Well, sometimes you may wonder. Can we measure 'success' in the exam? What exactly does a pass in the exam mean? Is it a predictor in any way of future attainment or ability? Would the candidates have reached

the required standard any other way? What other ways are there? I suspect we still don't know how effective or ineffective this examination is. Clearly those who sit ought to pass, if only to reflect the long years of 'training' that they have already had. If

at the time of this examination they, after all those years, find they fail, it may well be that we shouldn't be paying much attention to them, but asking ourselves how come they've gone through six years at medical school, years of fire in the hospital service, to produce someone whom we then say is incapable of being a general practitioner. It seems to me, we can hardly

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blame the candidates. The exam certainly lends an air of decorum and respectability to this rite of passage, and perhaps if I express my reservations about the whole affair you'll have to discount the respectability side of things, for which I have little time. But in 1957 I sat and passed the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians in London – a real grail. This was hugely difficult (the syllabus was 'medicine'), a highly examiner-dependent examination. After I had passed, I vowed if ever I got into a position of authority I'd do my best not to emulate it – it was so capricious and selective. Even then, no formal exam for entering a postgraduate medical college seemed to me the way

to go. So after all these years, I can see my ideals have come to nothing. I can see I have failed. Not that failing is necessarily a surprise at my age. The examination we constructed we saw as temporary, to be replaced by some form of assessment (details of this were unknown), an adult procedure for intelligent adults. It has not happened – sadly.

I'd like to think that our young postgraduates today are as capable as we were in our time. They probably are. But it's quite clear I'll never see our College enterprising enough, imaginative enough, even bold enough to break down the

traditions of formal examination. So be it. Yet I do wonder why the College is so subservient to the past, when there is still no proof that the parade-ground of the current exami-

nation exercises is of much use, other than to select those we think should join our precious little club. I'm quite surprised to find we have not recommended a 'black-

ball system'. Then we would be really up with the past. But where are the 'new' ideas? Smug perpetuation of an unproven system is hardly something to be proud of in the twenty-first century.

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