

# Nostalgia is not what it used to be

LIGHT AIRS

THE CONGENIAL obstetrician Dr Keith Hartman was elected as the 'year rep' of 1964. As a med student, for six years it was his duty to get up in front after lectures to deliver housekeeping advice to the unlistening mob. Very recently and 40 years after our graduation, Keith is still doing his duty and sent notice of an anniversary with plans for a celebration in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney. For me, a nostalgic reminder of that venue of the long ago final exams, when I gazed up for inspiration to the carved wooden angels entwined in the lofty rafters. Without compassion they failed to provide the answers then and will no doubt still be looking down, inscrutable as ever.

The call made me wonder about those old comrades, most of whom I have not seen or even heard of since the diaspora of graduation, when we metamorphosed to junior resident doctors at the various hospitals.

Depending on exam results, the clever were embraced into ivory towers, the remainder flung to the periphery. Will we remember or even recognise each other? What do we have in common and what will we talk about?

Perhaps we will sing the nostalgic faculty song.

Hurrah, hurrah, they've dubbed us all MB.

Hurrah, we're loose, enlarge the cem-e-try

Yet we'll miss the good ole days that never more will be, While we were passing through med-i-cine.

That forty years seems to have gone in a busy sort of a blur. Even though it is said that you are as young as you feel, this group represents the first wave of the baby boomer generation, now in the youth of old age, a generation predicted to bleed the pension system and vie for space in crowded retirement homes. Such prospects can be a source of horror, as many

flower children now in advanced adulthood have, or are currently seeing off our own parents in these places, many resonating with the tortured howls of dementia.

Looking forward into the years not so far away, you wonder what's the use of infirm old age? When does ambition become futile?

Some of our number have succumbed to disease and accident and will be spared this fate. It will be interesting to see how many are still flat out at work, or partially retired pottering in rose gardens between occasional patients, or sailing their hard-earned yachts into the sunset.

I recently visited my old friend and colleague Dr John D'arcy, who will attend the re-union, recovering in hospital from a knee replacement. He advised me: "It's time that you and I and all of us started to look after ourselves." In riposte, I told him of my hundred year old patient who commented, "If I had known I was going to live this long, I might have taken better care of myself."

Many sailors see an ocean voyage as metaphor for life's journey. You can be sailing along easily in light airs and then be wrecked by a sudden unexpected storm.

After 40 years you might wonder about being left behind in the advances of medicine and how really old doctors cope. It's a tribute to the wise teachers of yesteryear that they taught the basics in such a way that it's possible to update and build on the teachings.

Forty years ago, the yardstick of the Examiners was, "Is this individual safe to be let loose on the general public?" After residency of one year it was considered OK for a doctor to nail up the prescribed brass shingle in General Practice. Mostly people did more training but the road to Family Practice was much more direct and open than it is today. It's hard to believe now, that when I started in the country town of Mullumbimby

and wandered up to the local hospital without a scrap of credential, the CEO welcomed me without restrictions. Doctors were expected to know their own limitations.

The already established GPs were customarily doing tonsils, hernias, even caesareans and the associated anaesthetics in the little theatre. They took up the traditional teaching role for newcomers. Things changed and now this hospital has only the remains of a theatre, the big light asleep in the corner, never to shine again on inner human workings.

Even very old doctors still have much to teach, even from the bed of a nursing home. My father, the pioneering neurosurgeon Sir Douglas Miller died at 96. One of the last things he told was a surprise. Out of the blue he said, "Wise men know that it is best to live for the day".



David Miller

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