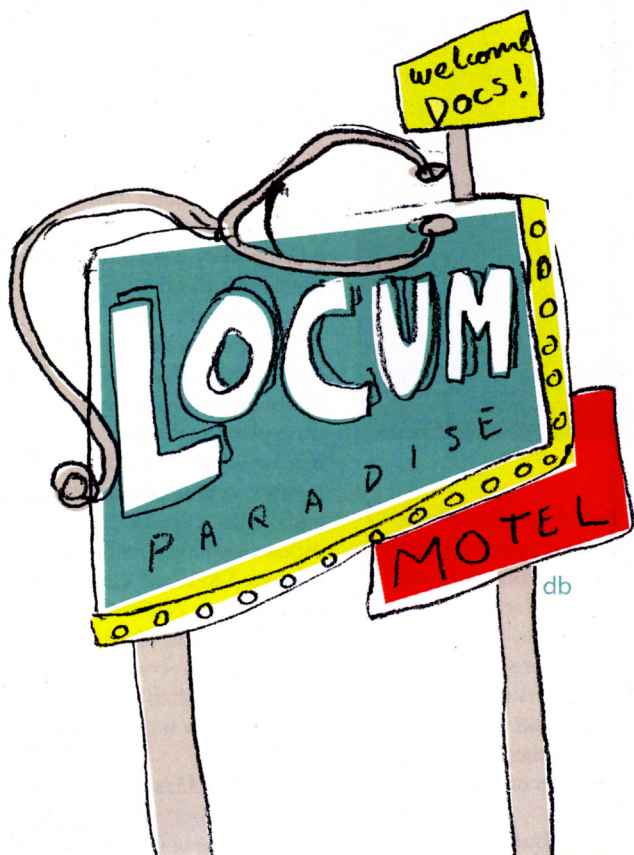


Locums at large

Light Airs David Miller



'I WANT THE BAR IN ME arm.' She was 15 years old, according to the unfamiliar computer program on my desk. Examination revealed a plain dumpy girl with a determined mouth.

A stranger in a strange land, It took me a few seconds to work out that 'the bar' must be local idiom for the hormone contraceptive implant. It had been some time since I had inserted one of these disappointing devices and I wasn't keen to sow trouble for myself, or the patient for that matter during my short-term stay.

Here I was on a distant shore of the Apple Isle conducting an experiment in the locum lifestyle.

Accommodation? The deluxe self-contained apartment of our old motel held some '50s charm, slightly outweighed by dire warnings about exchanging our old towels for theirs. Their 3-star rating would be compromised if an inspector discovered towels of different colours.

My companion, a writer behind deadline, seemed quite happy to see me out the door

for an unaccustomed 0830 start. I was working for an agency, something not previously attempted.

The modern corporate clinic reminded me of a spaceship which had landed in an old-fashioned coastal town to beam in the locals who appeared quite alienated by the bank of receptionists riveted to their computers.

Returning from that daydream which patients could mistake for deep thought, I hedged, 'Do your parents know about this?'

'Mum will be along soon.' Sure enough mum came in just in time for me to establish that my patient was newly engaged in a sexual relationship conducted at her boyfriend's house.

'What about the pill?' I parried as we talked about how young she was for such strong hormonal intervention on her still-forming body.

'Tried that,' she sulked. 'Any problems?' 'No. I just forget to take it,' I reflected this might explain the lack of adverse effects.

The mother seemed to understand that better than the

daughter who was adamant about having 'the bar' and suggested, 'Why not put a reminder in your phone for the pill?'

In desperation I went out to seek advice from the practice nurse who suggested, 'Tell her it's a great big thick needle and really hurts.'

This tactic made no difference to the set of the adolescent mouth.

'I'm not allowed to stay at his place anymore until I get the bar' she finally blurted out.

There it was, the boyfriend's mother setting the bar.

In my couple of weeks I of locuming I discovered a whole different world, medical nomads

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who move around from place to place, having time off in between. They come from all nations, old and young, male and female, single and accompanied. During my stay the other doctors were a senior Scot on his own, a mother of four children whose husband was home-schooling and a Chinese man waiting for his family who said the motel did not meet Singapore standards.

The last regular doctor was much missed and at only 48, may have been loved to death. Another, whose room I occupied was on extended sick leave, location unknown. A few wistful family relics around the

room gave hope that one day she might return.

In a mining backwater near the town of St Henri (not its real name but borrowed from the label of an excellent red that Dr Chris Ingall might have eulogised in his informative column, 'Wine and good health'), one of these locums had nested, to the delight of the inhabitants.

'His name is Cyril.' The museum curator informed me that he was a 35-year old Burmese who wanted to blend in, so anglicised his name. 'Dr Cyril has a dry humour, doesn't say much.'

The population mainly appeared to be elderly Caucasian, curious in light of the socio-medical myth that ready access to tertiary care is a prime consideration in retiree habitat selection. All medical emergencies were transferred by air, narrow roads to the city were twisted and populated by nocturnal wildlife.

The economy was depressed. Many shuttered houses were owned by mainland bargain hunters.

So what of the locuming lifestyle? There are definite benefits, no worries about getting paid, car and accommodation included and a chance to explore the region after work.

For the patients who have to keep changing doctors it's quite difficult, and many asked, 'Are you staying?'

A down side for the doctor too, this lack of continuity. One of my jobs was to go through test results from former doctors. I wonder too about some skin lesions I removed and hope that my successor did the right thing.

I also would like to know how my patient managed her boyfriend's mother. Maybe next summer I'll go back and find out.