

Preface

Surgeons' lives in the first half of the 20th century were coloured by war. Their concerns had been wound management and exposure to horrifying weapons, from poison gas at the start of that woeful epoch to atomic radiation in the end.

The second half of that century, my half, has been fortunate as, in a time of relative peace, antibiotics not only cured most bacterial infections including tuberculosis and syphilis but also allowed extraordinary new surgical interventions. The operating microscope completely changed what my own specialty could do and the surgery of deafness evolved dramatically. During our half century we found the means to do at least something for every type of deafness. Today most of our residual hearing problems are the result of aging and that is what we must deal with. What we want is not just to hear but to hear well however old we get, even to hear perfectly. It means that although we have accomplished a lot we still have much to do.

We were told, as medical students in 1951, that our life expectancy was 66 years and the life span allocated to us seemed adequate. Now, well past that deadline, it is possible to look back with satisfaction not just because we have, as a generation, already outlived our destiny by a couple of decades but because our achievements, including that of making deaf people hear, have been well beyond any expectations we may have had.

Before our time there was little that medicine or surgery could do for people other than relieve pain and make them comfortable until the advent of antibiotics. Heroic surgery often failed as a result of infection and some of the procedures offered by surgeons were misguided to say the least, and yet our predecessors thrived as a profession as they had a role in society which is not entirely the one we have now. They were somebody to

turn to and the good doctor developed trust and inspired confidence even though there was little that he could offer while the surgeon, called in for amputations or draining abscesses, was not even granted the title of “doctor”.

Ours has been a pivotal time in which to be a surgeon and I have enjoyed working in many of the finest centres. My colleagues showed remarkable skills and talents and it has been a rare pleasure to spend my life in the company of people I held in such high regard.

I took part in developments which have helped make deafness more manageable, but another element has been even more important in my life and that is getting to know patients by caring for them.

When I interviewed young candidates for admission to our Medical School at Guy’s they all expressed the wish, perhaps the need, to help people. I then had to judge their aptitude and capacity to do this as a doctor rather than as something else equally praiseworthy, but at the heart of it all there remained the wish to be of help to those in pain and distress.

Looking back at my life has been like examining a colourful tapestry but it does not seem continuous, one thing inevitably leading to another. It appears to me like a series of distinct events which have taken me by surprise. Interesting and often extraordinary observations revealed how all sorts of people live and behave. Doctors have always juxtaposed the rich with the poor, the powerless and vulnerable with Emperors and Kings, and medicine has traditionally allowed the son of a nobody to place his hand on the tyrant’s abdomen.

There was no air travel in the first half of the 20th century whereas I was able to visit hospitals all over the world. Emerging in the car park of the Hospital Cantonal in Geneva I remember my assistant saying, “Wait a moment! Have you noticed?” What he was pointing out was: “Their car park is cleaner than our hospital!” He was exaggerating but I learned a thing or two and I taught also. I was a visiting Professor at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and I taught at the Free University in Amsterdam. I gave a course in Beijing and went to the Persian Gulf. Everywhere I may have learned more than I taught.

The way my life has turned out has been happy and absorbing as lives go, though likely to interest only a few. On the other hand I look back to my time as a surgeon with wonder, as what I have experienced or observed seems like a succession of exciting and often perplexing episodes.