



Off keys

In which Dr Fraser explains why it's easier for some surgeons to perform an operation than to make a photocopy.

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There is a widespread but erroneous belief that surgeons, being presumed to be dexterous, are therefore technocrats, well versed in the operation of any or all of the multiplicity of appliances that virtually govern our modern existence. Not so.

There may be several reasons for this. One of these, held dear by my wife, is that surgeons don't actually *do* anything for themselves. For example, other people gown them and put on their gloves; instruments are placed in their impatient, outstretched hands; their moist brows are mopped, as is the floor when they are finished; and their garbled reports are interpreted and transcribed by people whom they never see and seldom acknowledge. The subtle expectation of similar attention at home is not appreciated. Yet, invari-

ably, they are called upon to perform such tasks as opening bottles, programming VCRs, changing wheels, tying on worm-laden fish hooks, and dressing impossibly struggling young children with the exhortation, "Come on. You're supposed to be good with your hands!"

I am. I was. And then again, I'm not.

You see, modern machines—computers and the like—can do the most amazing things for you if you know what you want them to do and how to tell them to do it. You have to understand them and, as far as I can make out, the best way is—as with golfing or using the toilet—to learn at an early age.

Copying machines are another source of alarm and despondency. They demand access codes then besiege

with options: number of copies, one side or both, scale down, enlarge, and repeat run. Pretty heavy stuff, or so it seems to me.

Where I used to work, on the wall by the photocopier is an enlargement (done on the wretched machine!) of a cartoon depicting an older gentleman saying to his younger, nubile companion, "I am always careful around this copier. I think it can smell fear." Just above the breast pocket of his coat someone has neatly penciled in my initials.

Dr Fraser is retired from pediatric general surgery at BC Children's Hospital, where he was head of surgery. He enjoys reading, writing, and erratic golf.