

Out of characters

In modern medicine and its teaching, there are simply not enough characters.

Graham C. Fraser, FRCS, FACS

An increasingly favorite topic being discussed in the current journals I receive is that of medical education. Its various aspects are closely appraised and, in particular, the newer methods and standards of postgraduate training are spiritedly scrutinized.

However, in my opinion not enough attention or print is devoted to the teachers themselves. This got me thinking of some of the clinicians under whom I trained, and there then emerged an impression that I am certain is correct. Namely, that in modern medicine and its teaching, there are not enough characters.

I am fortunate to have enjoyed the company, tutelage, and subsequent friendship of several such individuals. What makes a character? To be sure, ability, wisdom, experience, and the gift of communicating are essential for a good teacher to possess. But there has to be something else. Style, class, humor, even eccentricity may set such an individual apart.

One has to admit that there may be negative aspects to be included. Rudeness, blustering, and stubbornness

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.

have all been experienced, but these were, for me, few and far between.

Current "political correctness" was then unknown and I feel we were all the better for that.

I was lucky to be trained by several notable individuals, including two knights of the realm, and without exception they were, in their different ways, definitely characters.

Let me introduce you to a few. Sadly, perhaps save one, all are no longer with us, but they most certainly live on in my fond memory.

In the mid-1960s I was appointed, to no small surprise of myself (and perhaps others), to be chief resident and resident assistant surgeon at the world-renowned Hospital for Sick Children at Great Ormond Street in London. This brought me into close personal contact with those at the centre and pinnacle of pediatric surgery in Britain.

Retired, but still active, was Sir Denis Browne, who was famous for his treatment of club feet, hare lip, and almost everything in between. He was also an inventor, gadgeteer, and Wimbledon-class tennis player. Each Tuesday he would do a private case from anywhere in the world and it fell to me to prepare everything and to assist him. I recall him, on one occasion, operating on a vital part of a Belgian boy's anatomy, the patient coming from semi-royalty. With a twinkle

in his eye, he allowed that this operation was being done for "future dynastic reasons."

DB, as he was called, had achieved one distinction, which however hard and long I tried I could not emulate. He was driven to work by his anesthesiologist!

Sir David Innes Williams was the pre-eminent children's urologist of the time, X-rays and patients being sent for his opinion from all over the world. One day I accompanied him to a consultation and I watched as he tried in vain to get the resident presenting the case to relax and be coherent and lucid. In his delightful, whimsical manner he smiled and joked, but to no avail. As we left, he took my arm and said softly, "Graham, one of the most dreadful of all congenital anomalies is ...," he paused, and as I eagerly awaited some precious surgical pearl of wisdom, he continued, "to be born completely devoid of a sense of humor!"

How true. David was a superb surgeon, gentleman, human being, and friend, and we corresponded until quite recently.

Predating these two giants in my career was a Dr Callum McLeod. He hailed from the outer Hebridean Isles and had that soft lilting accent of those parts. Callum was to provide me with a gambit that I used over many years

Continued on page 141

Continued from page 142

to have a little fun with an earnest resident or student. He invented “McLeod’s disease.” When we would go to Callum with, to us, a completely bizarre puzzling string of symptoms and signs, he would nod knowingly and sagely, and place his hands together, making a steeple of his fingers. He would then rock gently on his heels, look into the far distance, and pronounce wisely in that soft voice of his, “Ah yes. You get that sometimes.” He would then quietly walk away leaving us feeling no wiser but thinking that we were!

Wonderful doctors all: wise, famous, respected, and very definitely characters.

There were inevitably examples of less-enviable traits of personality to be observed in some of my mentors. Nonetheless, I am prepared to forgive their eccentricities, not to mention their occasional salvos of outrageous-

ness, not to say warped sense of humor. One such, long departed, I will protect out of fondness by using only his initials, GM. He was a pioneer in the then-emerging specialty of vascular surgery and, like many of that ilk, was a stickler for detail and regulated decorum. Naturally, he was completely against all forms of smoking.

On one occasion during ward rounds, he discovered a patient sneaking a few quick puffs by a nearby window, whereupon GM rounded on the head nurse and bellowed “Sister! Fetch this man’s trousers. He is leaving!” And so he did, to return only a few days later, much chastened, and with no vestige of tobacco anywhere near his person.

On another day GM was loping along the corridor in his dark gray suit and inevitable suede shoes, when the nearby patient’s relative’s phone rang at his elbow. Snatching it up, he barked, “Yes, what?” A rather timid

voice said, “Can you please give me the latest report on Mrs Gunn?”

“Certainly,” replied GM, “Bang! Bang!” and slammed the instrument down, striding on his way.

I often wonder what would be the result of that today! But I forgive him because he was a splendid clinician and his operative results were amazing. Also, his true sense of humor was delightful and he was very kind and encouraging to me.

Of necessity, I have provided you with a series of names. I have one more.

Lord St. John Stevas is, perhaps, the most staunch, loyal, and well-known royalist in England. He said, “One should be careful, when writing or speaking, not to mention too many names. One simply must avoid, at all costs, to be labeled as a name dropper, as Her Majesty remarked to me only last week.” **BCMJ**