

## Personal View

"In case of an emergency," whined the invigilator, "you are advised to take refuge under your desks." A fat lot of good that would have been if we had had a direct hit from a flying bomb. I had been at close quarters with bombs many times before and I could not have cared less about the invigilator's recommendation. I had already glanced through the conjoint obstetrics and gynaecology examination paper, and there was a question about pemphigus neonatorum, which was of more concern to me than any doodle-bug. I knew nothing about pemphigus and the prospect of failing the paper because of this was daunting. The rest of the paper was straightforward stuff, which any reasonably able candidate could answer. I got on with what I could do when, about halfway through the examination, a bomb came over and we scrambled under our desks. In the adjacent righthand column facing the front, was a short, handsome, powerful man with a snubnose and jet black hair, who did not seem to be having too much difficulty with his paper. Invigilators after all have their own skins to save, and there wasn't one in sight. I hissed quietly to Snubnose, "Pemphigus?" "Staph.," he whispered back, "public health". I didn't even thank him but after we emerged I wrote two pages of public health nonsense and passed the examination.

I met "Snubnose" again when I was acting Medical Officer at Boyce Barracks and he came in for his T.A.B. jabs. This time I was able to thank him for his help. I never met him again, but I have often thought about him. I don't even know his name and I can only hope that he has a job, wife, and family at least to his liking. Cheating? Not a bit of it. Those wretched, wily examiners should not have slipped a paediatric question into a midder-and-gynae examination.

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I thought of examiners as the vilest form of humanity until I was a seasoned registrar. One Saturday morning one of my chiefs asked me to mark some conjoint papers. "Call round at 2 o'clock, or 1400 as you would say." I collected a dozen papers—60 questions—and was soon back in my room. Taught by the late Mr. Thomas Knox-Shaw, I made a rough calculation of the length of time it would take me to do the job. I reckoned I would be done by 21.00, then have time for a quick one before bed. My instructions were to draw the chief's attention to serious errors, or even candidate's excellence, and award a mark out of 20 for each question. For example, if a dull pass, award 10, if not, fewer than 10; if better, more than 10. At first I thought this was kid's stuff: put the obvious failures into one column; the clever lads into another; and the doubtful group in the middle. But I was soon in deep trouble. What was I to do if a candidate wrote, perhaps a brilliant answer, in completely illegible hand-writing? What was I to do with a candidate who answered four out of five questions adequately but completely failed in his fifth? It was pemphigus all over again.

One man wrote legibly, in good English, answered all the questions well, and made no howlers. He would be a pass, anyway, and gave me a standard. My landlady knocked on the door and told me that high tea was ready. I was astonished how late it was. I hadn't even examined completely one candidate's paper, far less given him a mark. I raced through high tea and got back to work, still looking up points I was not sure about in standard texts. At 21.30 I gave up; there was no question of finishing the job by 21.00. I had a quick one at my local and turned in.

I felt much better after a good sleep, and was back with the dozen candidates after breakfast. By now I was getting the hang of the thing and by noon I had marked most of the papers. Two had to go down, no matter how I rearranged the marks. The man whose paper had been my standard gave me an insight into sheer brilliance. The rest passed; however, I was completely floored by one candidate, who seemed to write enough but whose hand-writing was absolutely illegible. I spent two hours on his paper and in the end gave up and awarded him 10 out of 20 marks. On Monday I returned the papers to the chief and a few days later asked him whether I had marked them to his satisfaction. Apparently I had failed the two candidates whom he would have failed, but on the whole my marking was too generous.

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I think that the average examiner will go to any length to pass a candidate in a standard examination, and I have now revised my view that all examiners are the vilest form of humanity. Professors have their pets, but the external examiner will see that the pet is not unduly pushed.

The awarding of first-class honours still causes trouble in some places. I heard this recently but I can remember similar trouble 20 years ago.

When I was an assistant in Albany, New York, the multiple choice question was just coming in. I scoffed at this as a party game until I was invited to try my hand at it. Selecting the correct answer from six equally-plausible suggestions may be very taxing. Possibly the system is fairer but it does not require a man to express himself carefully on paper. I was told by the chief whose papers I marked that beginners tend to be too generous in "open" marking: for example, they give 12 marks out of 20 to help a man who might fail for a mark or two. The late Mr. F. E. Stabler and Dr. E. C. Warner told me about the closed system of marking. If a candidate only made a scribble he had to have eight marks. Mr. Stabler also spoke of the reluctance of examiners to fail people but said that sometimes it was necessary.

Examinations, of one sort or another, are essential both practically and theoretically to get a man or a lass to work, but a final examination should not be a selection board. I used to mark the old obstetric book at the Princess Mary Maternity Hospital, month in and month out, so learnt what to look for. If the marking wasn't done punctually, or if it was thought unfair, I got it in the neck. Students could always let-off steam with a registrar, but might hesitate to do so with a more senior man. When I took the M.R.C.O.G., the old book consisted of writing up 20 obstetric case histories and 20 gynaecological case histories together with two clinical commentaries. This book had to be submitted before one could go up for the written part of the examination. Ask any man or woman who has got the M.R.C.O.G. and they will all say that writing the book was an awful sweat. True, there is usually room for a little tidying up—the odd blood-pressure or a forgotten blood group, but I am not aware of any serious falsification.

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I explained to the man in the "Horns of Queslett" that some forms of conduct were avoided between doctor and patient. They could all be associated with the letter A—alcohol, abortion, adultery, association and advertising. The Man thought for a moment and then grunted—"and Andrew."

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