

James Le Fanu

Questioning answers



JAMES LE FANU, doctor, writer, and free thinker, has spent the past 30 years shedding light in places that others believed to be already well illuminated. Never content to take yes for an answer, in his columns for the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* and in his books, Le Fanu peers with an unfailingly sceptical eye at the shibboleths of healthcare, from diet (*Eat Your Heart Out*, 1986) to medicine (*The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine*, 1999) and genetic determinism (*Why Us?*, 2009). Prescient and provocative, Le Fanu is the goad to keep doctors humble and scientists on the right track.

What is your pet hate?

"All of those who claim to know the answers—politicians, epidemiologists, noisy atheists, etc"

What was your earliest ambition?

I fancied myself as a medical missionary, doing good in exotic places.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?

The fortitude and good humour of the common man (and indeed woman)—particularly the thousands of patients and *Telegraph* readers whose insights, experiences, and stories have so broadened my horizons and enriched my life.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Mistaking potassium chloride for aminophylline. Luckily, the crash team did not get stuck in the lift or ask too many searching questions.

What was your best career move?

Arranging to meet a friend one Saturday afternoon in Fleet Street's cavernous El Vino and finding myself in conversation over a bottle of claret with the *Sunday Telegraph's* recently appointed news editor. His unsolicited suggestion that I might contribute the occasional article in exchange for a £30 weekly retainer, plus expenses, seemed very generous.

Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

That's an easy one: born in 1950, I am a Bevan baby and can thus legitimately nominate the great man as the best health secretary in my lifetime. His imaginative genius in creating a "cheap and cheerful" health service ranks among the great achievements of Western civilisation. The worst was Ken Clarke, whose cynical, ignorant advocacy of the "internal market" introduced the Trojan horse of

managerialism that undermined the health service's greatest asset—the goodwill and idealism of its workforce.

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

My parents—for my existence, obviously, and for the pearl beyond price of a secure, supportive, and stimulating childhood.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

My parents, again, for taking them too much for granted and not sufficiently expressing my indebtedness to them in word and deed.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

Two Rembrandt lithographic etchings to hang in my study—preferably one of his portraits and the *Descent from the Cross by Torchlight*.

Where are or were you happiest?

Walking down the aisle of the magical Church of St Mary on Paddington Green, to Charles-Marie Widor's wedding march.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

The 2004 General Medical Services contract, which financially remunerated good doctors for practising bad medicine.

What book should every doctor read?

The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine—and not just for the royalties, although they are, of course, gratefully received.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

A bit of a crowded field, but it would have to include the resounding certainty of Bach's "Gratias agimus" from the *Gloria* of his B minor mass. "We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory." Quite so.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

On WorldofSolitaire.com, Klondike (the "turn three" version)—regrettably, the most addictive method of time wasting ever invented.

If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?

Wander around the Serengeti National Park and become more intimately acquainted with our fellow creatures.

What is your most treasured possession?

My membership card for the London Library in St James's Square. A browser's paradise.

What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?

No more than the global warming experts flying around the world to their international conferences/junkets.

What personal ambition do you still have?

My next book—(*Don't*) *Keep Taking the Pills*—might, I hope, help to protect the public from the grievous harms of mass medicalisation.

Summarise your personality in three words

I would like to think amused, inquisitive, and tolerant (see my pet hate, though).

Where does alcohol fit into your life?

Probably excessively, though only rarely before 7 (pm).

What is your pet hate?

All of those who claim to know the answers—politicians, epidemiologists, noisy atheists, etc.

If you weren't a doctor what would you be instead?

A spy.

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