My Student Elective

Working as a praktikant in Sweden

IAN C HUNTER

Like most medical students who spend their elective abroad, I shall always look back on mine with pleasure as I remember happy times enjoyed with new friends. I am also grateful for the opportunity it provided to get to know another country and its people. I spent the summer months working on my elective project with a Swedish drug company in a Stockholm suburb. I did this under the *praktikant* system, which allows

science and technology students to spend their vacation working for a commercial firm and applying their knowledge and skills to the practical problems of running their own research project.

The *praktikant* usually joins a team and works under the supervision of the team leader, but he has a clearly defined research objective for which he alone is responsible. He has to justify his methods and use of resources to the team leader, who acts as a scientific devil's advocate; but if the system works properly the leader should not use his control of the purse strings to dictate policy, nor should he

assume the role of nursemaid when minor difficulties arise. The aim is that the *praktikant* should learn to accept responsibility for his own work and ideas. Thus the gap between student days and work is bridged in much the same way that clerkships and final-year locum jobs introduce the medical student to clinical responsibilities.

The relationship between academic research and the pharmaceutical industry is closer in Sweden than in most other countries. In the commercial pharmacology department where I worked there were two senior researchers who were honorary associate professors at the University of Stockholm, and two others were recognised teachers. The company farmed out drug development projects to several university departments, and encouraged their co-operation on joint projects. Visits to our department by clinical and academic researchers were frequent and welcome.

My impression is that this close relationship between commercial and academic research is all to the good. Firstly, I believe that it removes suspicions of bias from the considerable volume of useful research done by the drug companies when they encourage co-operative ventures and open exchanges with university departments. Secondly, in Sweden the close relationship has encouraged commercial laboratories to expand their work beyond routine sales-directed drug development into so-called basic or pure research. For example, in the laboratory where I worked most research was concerned with routine drug testing and toxicity screening, but much effort was also expended, with no economic goals in mind, on behavioural studies of neuroendocrine relationships. This project gave satisfaction to the staff, and almost certainly improved their standing with their academic counterparts. Much of the work I did as a *praktikant* was of direct interest to the company—the development of a new analgesic combination. But much of my time was occupied with studies on the methodology of measuring analgesic potency and the phenomenon of stress-induced analgesia.

Some things, however, did not impress me. I found there was a lack of organised communication between commercial researchers; there were no seminars, and the research effort was co-ordinated between departments by remote administrators. In a university lateral communication between related disciplines at seminars is popular and important.

Equipment and materials are undoubtedly more lavishly provided in a commercial laboratory than in other laboratories. I wondered whether this reflected a creditable attitude to the reinvestment of resources in research or just the high profitability of drug sales.

Despite their traditional Nordic seriousness the Swedes are warm and friendly people who welcome foreign visitors, which is fortunate because of necessity Sweden is a cosmopolitan society. It is a huge country with a small population, and despite financial incentives to couples to have more children the birth rate remains low. As a result there has been a massive influx of foreign labour to work in Swedish industry, which has expanded rapidly in the past decade because of cheap energy from hydroelectricity schemes.

Industrial expansion has brought prosperity to Sweden, but this is not reflected in a very high standard of living for most people. There are several reasons for this apparent paradox. Firstly, wealth is more equally distributed than in Britain and, although many young professional Swedish families are unable to afford their own house and have to settle for life in a flat, I saw few of the areas of slums and deprivation that mar British inner cities. Secondly, prices are high not just for luxury items but also for basic foods and services. Thirdly, social service provision in Sweden for the elderly, the chronically sick, and other dependent groups is generous, but this and other expenditure is financed by a basic rate of income tax of over 50%. This offsets the benefit of higher salaries. The Swedes in general, however, are happy with their lot, and their lack of self-interest is most appealing.

Sweden is afflicted with many of the social problems we have in Britain—in particular, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence among young people. I was amazed and saddened by the many skid-row drunks in the streets of Stockholm and its suburbs. Even more upsetting is the apparent youth of the drunks; people in their 20s may be seen in the streets drinking cheap wine and begging for money to buy more. Heroin abuse is also a big problem, and newspaper reports of young addicts being found dead in public toilets are frequent. As in other capitals, mugging is common, and Stockholm subways are best avoided at night. The Swedes have tried to improve matters by providing at huge cost good rehabilitation facilities for alcoholics and drug addicts. So far they have failed to identify the underlying causes of these social problems and prevent them.

Government interference in everyday matters is greater, I believe, than we in Britain would find acceptable. For example, it is now a criminal offence for a parent or teacher to inflict corporal punishment on a child—even a smack. Professional boxing has been outlawed on the grounds that it is dangerous and has promoted violence in some people who have watched it. The sale of alcohol other than very weak beer is tightly controlled, and in the suburb where I lived there was only one officially approved drinks store for 70 000 people. This was an inconvenience for most people and in no way restricted the supply available to alcohol abusers. Road safety laws sensibly demand the wearing of seat belts, but measures like the compulsory use of lights on vehicles during the day and the obligation to fit electric wipers to headlamps seem ridiculous. Although

well intentioned, these laws are clumsy and have had no effect on the problems of child abuse, violence, alcoholism, and road accidents; and yet the inconveniences caused to the general public are considerable.

I was impressed with the constructive use made of leisure time in Sweden, and all age groups seem to participate in activities like running, orienteering, volleyball, and water sports. Most companies provide sporting facilities for employees. Weekends in the countryside are popular, either camping or at lakeside cottages, which are understandably prized possessions. The "right of everyman" is an ancient Swedish decree that the general public can have free access to walk and pitch camp anywhere except within 100 m of someone's permanent home. Such opportunities for recreation are the luxuries of a beautiful country where the population is small and space is plentiful.

In conclusion, for me the elective period was an opportunity to work on a project which interested me and to plan and take responsibility for my own efforts. Going abroad anywhere adds new dimensions to an elective period and in particular one benefits by getting to know and appreciate from the inside another country and its people. This in itself is a worthwhile objective, but in addition time abroad provides you with a new perspective from which to consider the strengths and weaknesses of life in your own country. Now that competition and career structures dictate that many medical graduates will never have an opportunity later to step off their particular career treadmill and experience travel and research we must defend the place of the elective in the medical curriculum.

Reading for Pleasure

Time for a little something

CHARLES B WILSON

I enjoy reading so much that I thought I would increase the pleasure by taking a rapid-reading course. But it was not for me: I read fairly rapidly anyway, and if a subject is read to be studied one reads slowly, and if one reads for the beauty and style of the writing, why race through it—when a pause now and then, a reverie, a chuckle, or a flash of admiration is called for, to be lingered over and enjoyed? A suitable place, whether it be a comfortable bed, a reclining chair with a good lamp, or a favourite nook in the garden, adds to the pleasure. Taking books on holiday is acceptable, but taking a book to read while mackerel fishing is looked on askance by purist fishermen. Better to give oneself up to the seductive pleasure of the lapping waves, the peep of the oystercatchers, the sight of the sails of other boats, or the receding shoreline. We are blessed with one of the best county libraries in our local market town. They have two grand facilities: one is a computer-like box from which you may select any book in the county, and it will be available within the week; the second is a weekly travelling service which stops 50 yards from our gate.

Family and friends

When one is young, the arrival of a puppy—or, in our case, a mongoose brought home from Malaya—in the family starts off a whole train of books to read. It is quite a wrench to give up stories like the *William* books, the Dr Dolittle series, or *Thick of the Fray at Zeebrugge*, and to start reading grown-up books. Our families have a great influence here. Sir Hugh Clifford, a friend of my parents, wrote never-to-be-forgotten stories of the Sakai in the Malayan jungles; E M Delafield, and Percy French (a friend of my grandparents) are other names that spring to mind. My Belfast grandfather, with whom we stayed while our parents were abroad, was an ex-covenanter who became a Presbyterian minister, and he used to take me round to hear famous preachers. One I can never forget was the Reverend St John Irvine, who gave an inspiring sermon to a packed congregation. He was a man who would stop in the middle of reading the lesson to tell an anecdote, and have us smiling if not laughing. I was sure that God, if not my grandfather, would strike him dead. But he enthralled even my grandfather. He wrote a lovely book called *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*—a tribute only a son could write to his mother.

Much later, I went to SA (Nazi storm troops) rallies in Germany, and heard the harsh voice of Hitler. There was no doubt about his control over his audience. I never read any of his speeches,

Thurlestone Sands, Nr Kingsbridge, South Devon TQ7 3JR
CHARLES B WILSON, VRD, MRCP, retired general practitioner