

As he drove home Mr Pringle reflected on the frailty of human beings, their vulnerability, their weaknesses, their illogicalities. All this could so easily have been avoided. Heart failure from untreated hyperthyroidism was a disease of the past. It never happened now except... except when patients did not understand or want to understand.

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He woke and groped for the telephone. "Can you come—quickly," asked Dr Fowler, "I am sorry for calling you. . . ."

Pringle clambered out of bed, half-asleep. It was 3 am. She was dead when he arrived at the hospital. "Some dysrhythmia or just pulmonary oedema?" he wondered as he stared at Mrs Nolan lying in the bed, her auburn hair neatly combed, her eyes closed, her attractive face turned to the ceiling, her slender sunburnt arms and hands with well cared for nails still outside the counterpane.

As he walked slowly and sadly down the six steps of the hospital into the stillness of the cold night air he coughed unconsciously. "What a health hazard," he mused, "Should never have happened." He lit a cigarette as he drove away.

Florence

E SAPHIER

I fell abrooding when I saw the holiday ad. A picture came up in my mind's eye. Sharp, clear, precise, and complete with its little package of emotional content. There was my cousin Florrie 70 years ago, and my brother crawling under the table about to take a bite out of an apple she was dangling. The same picture, the same detail every time. How on earth does the mind's eye work?

Up came the next slide showing my classroom. The lesson was about Florence Nightingale and my pal called her "The lady with the lump." He had to write "lamp" 100 times.

Then followed a clear view of our entering the City of Florence one Sunday morning. I do not think Florence is all it is cracked up to be. One lot of art is very much like another. It was really very hot. I am afraid we headed straight out again. Mind you, we had spent some time previously admiring a masterpiece with the aid of a cassette recording. We made all the right noises, and it was a shock to learn that we had been listening to the wrong tape.

Dr A Leslie Florence

My computer then continued its program with the shot that really mattered. It was the front cover of the *BMJ*: the date 31 December 1960. There, in letters of fire on an out-of-the-blue background under the heading Correspondence was the title of a letter from a general practitioner named Florence. Dr A Leslie Florence to be precise. Well, not letters of fire actually. More like black.

When I was a kid, I read Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Sexton Blake, and H S Partington with equal gusto. Partington had written a smashing book called *Intermediate Chemistry*. I did not understand it all, but I used to savour the lovely terms which seemed to capture essential truth, and fit everything precisely in its place in the scheme.

When I qualified I still doodled with structural formulas, and I preferred the chemical to the trade name of drugs. I must have been one of the few general practitioners around who knew the proper name for Distaval. That was why I read the *BMJ* that New Year's Day instead of throwing it away. The letter was entitled "Is thalidomide to blame?" and I was intrigued. (It

was not until 2 December 1961 that the first warnings of the teratogenic effects of thalidomide were given in the *Lancet*.)

Unlike the city, I do not know that Dr Florence was ever cracked up to be anything special. I seem to remember his practice was in Scotland. When I came to look him up, years later, I could not find him in the directory. In all the name calling that ensued I do not remember his name being mentioned, and so far as I am aware, no tribute was ever paid him. Yet he must have saved a lot of suffering. The 21st anniversary of his letter is coming up. Perhaps it is not too late to pay him a tribute now.

The letter stated that he had given thalidomide to several elderly people who later developed a peripheral neuropathy. He could not think of any other likely cause and wondered if thalidomide was to blame. I too had had a similar patient. The letter clicked. I felt sure he was right. I never used thalidomide again. I told other people. They in turn told others. I remember a psychiatrist friend telling me how several of them had stopped using the drug. I also remember the picture of the little girl reaching up to the drug cupboard, advertising the safety of Distaval, which stayed in my surgery for years!

Nobody, of course, can ever possibly know who, if anyone, was saved. Yet there must be gentlemen in Surrey now afoot, and now aged 21, who would not have been afoot on St Crispin's or any other day if Dr Florence had not written his letter. Odd to think that the *BMJ* no longer prints the correspondence contents on the front cover. If the same thing had happened today I, for one, would never have known.

The thought is not enough

One last aspect, illustrated by what happened to my wife, after she had been driving in thick traffic for some time. She was stopped in a jam, when there was a tap on her window. A hand held out a piece of paper, a smile, a wave, a raise of the hat, and he was gone. On the paper she read "I take back all I've said about women drivers." Of course, I admire my wife, and her driving, but equally I admire the writer of this note. It was not enough to have the thought. He had to find some paper, a pen, actually write the note, get out of his car, deliver it, and get back before the traffic started. I have thoughts. Sometimes I get them down. Usually before I've got the paper, the message, the envelope, and especially the stamp together, the mood has passed. Dr Florence got it all together and delivered his message. I would like to say thanks.

Health Centre, Sutton, Surrey SM1 2RJ

E SAPHIER, MRCS, LRCP, general practitioner