



EDITORIAL

This edition of the Journal combines the annual 'special' edition – this time a focus on Obstetrics and Gynaecology – with a series of articles loosely linked by the term 'professional practice'. Rauf Ghani and Katherine Granger have put together an impressive cast of local authors to provide an authoritative account of current practice.

Not so much revolution this time, but evolution. Evolution well describes the appearance of autonomous practice in midwifery and psychiatric nursing over the last few years. Waterbirth came into fashion, suffered a decline under attack from the medical establishment, but survived because its proponents could demonstrate its safety. Psychiatric nurses may now manage their own cases independently of consultant psychiatrists: the sea change in responsibility and authority is in part a consequence of the realities of medical manpower problems. Even the consultation, that unit of activity that defines the medical profession and justifies the time and resources put into doctors' training and contracts, is subject to evolutionary processes. Doctors are now experimenting with email as an alternative to seeing patients and specialist nurses are taking on specific roles.

Evolution, of course, is the end result of a process of natural selection, of survival of best practices after initial enthusiasm and rigorous critical monitoring. We should

support new initiatives but must always be prepared to ask whether they represent a real improvement over what went before. Are the patients better off for easy access to secondary care? Are they better off because the nurse or the midwife is the right person to do the job, or is the change a pragmatic 'fix' for a medical manpower problem, or worse still, an ideological 'fix' to satisfy the aspirations of an emerging profession and encourage recruitment? The other day, as I talked with a surgeon as his 'non-physician' assistant sutured the abdomen and my 'non-physician' assistant supervised the anaesthetic, I was tempted to wonder what the investment in time and training had delivered over and above our free coffee break. Early days, of course: in an ideal world we would both be turning our attention to another pressing problem. And probably paying for the coffee.

Evolution is a product of a healthy and vibrant climate that stimulates debate. New ideas have to be examined critically and with an understanding of the local health environment, which is why the Journal needs local authors to tell us about local issues. Not all 'dinosaurs' will be replaced in the evolutionary process: adaptive and successful ones – the crocodiles – may survive.

Andrew M Severn
Editor

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