

Roger K A Allen

OUTSIDE THE SQUARE

Remembrance of things past: reveries of a sleep physician

R. K. A. ALLEN

Private Practice, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

PROLOGUE

As a young preschool boy, I often accompanied my father on weekend ward rounds at the Ballina Base Hospital. I can still smell the 'hypo' solution of the blue-black X-rays he developed manually before hanging them to dry on metal clips in the eerie red light. Our house – which had the surgery attached often took on the appearance of a casualty clearing station, with patients lying bleeding or vomiting on our sofa or wheezing with asthma while Dad gave them subcutaneous adrenaline – a minim a minute while the ambulance was called. The surgery, with its immaculately polished linoleum floor (a credit to my mother, who had been a senior theatre sister during the end of the War), smelled of methylated spirits. On white huckaback drapes were long, glass-topped butter dishes of blue benzalkonium chloride (Zefran), in which soaked the instruments of his mysterious profession – artery forceps; Harrison-Cripps; the Mayo Brothers' needle-holders; glass syringes with reusable metal needles that he often sharpened; coils of black- and cream-coloured catgut; and curved suture needles of different sizes.

When grateful patients could not pay 15 shillings (\$1.50, for younger readers) for the consultation, these hard-working farming and fishing folk would pay him in kind – a bucket of prawns or live crabs fresh from the crab pot or a quart of fresh, unpasteurized cream, which my mother (his long-suffering assistant) would magically turn into delicious salty butter and buttermilk. I fondly remember seeing my father in the backyard one night, gingerly cornering a recalcitrant mud crab that had escaped from a hessian sugar bag.

Along with a few other dedicated GPs in town, my father was admired and, by and large, loved by the local people. The doctor and his wife played a prominent part in the social life of the town and earned a good income, but were available all the time. There was fun too – charity fancy dress balls in the local Wigmore Hall or at the ubiquitous School of Arts and the Annual Easter Festival, with its raffles and parade.

I quite often accompanied my father on house calls, including to the home of a bedridden young boy, aged about 10 years. He rarely saw children other than me, until eventually our visits stopped. In retrospect, he must have had some sort of muscular dystrophy. But every cloud has a silver lining – his parents gave me his new, battery-operated train set after he died. This was a wonderful treasure only ever dreamed of.

From this serendipitous early apprenticeship germinated my desire to become a doctor. This wish was fulfilled 20 years later, in spite of sheepish answers to the contrary when Dad's patients asked me if I was going to follow in my father's footsteps.

THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE

But what has this to do with the topic, you may rightly ask. Back then, the front of every doctor's car carried a small but powerful symbol, which could even sway the local police sergeant to be lenient. It was a small, enamelled, dark-blue and red metal badge that displayed two snakes curling around a winged stick. It was usually attached to the number plate or bumper bar. It was a kind of 'secret handshake', dating from the dawn of Western civilization. It was the symbol of the sacred art of healing, a religious symbol of a Greek god that still retained its power in 1955 AD, in the sleepy seaside town of Ballina, northern New South Wales, Australia – cons in time and space from Ancient Greece. Medicare had not been invented and doctors were rarely sued.

Correspondence to: Roger K. A. Allen,

St Andrew's Place, Spring Hill Brisbane, 4000 Old, Australia. Email: rgerallen@ozemail.com.au

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This brings me to a dream I vividly recall from my boyhood when I was delirious with ulcerative gingivitis, contracted one Christmas from swimming in a storm water drain. As a sleep physician, I am aware of such dreams in Genesis (viz. dreams of the Pharaoh's butler and baker interpreted by Mr Joseph Jacobson Esq., the Pharaoh's right-hand man). Like them, I submit my reveries to the readers for interpretation particularly the gastroenterologists, who are renowned for divining entrails.

THE DREAM

If I recall it went something like this:

There was a very high mountain, made of used chariot and cart wheels, called Mount Olympic. The mountain was perpetually shrouded in mist and cloud in the ozone-depleted 'ether' above, with such a low partial pressure of oxygen that mere mortals below who breathed the 'aer' could never survive in its rarefied atmosphere, let alone see what was going on up there. On the summit was a temple, an acropolis with a huge Red Cross flag on top, in which lived all the gods of healing. This Parthenon was served by an order of devoted virgin priestesses and a theocracy run by numerous gods of healing, each with individual characteristics. The worst was a tetrad of psychotic gods who had been banished to life in the pandemonium of a psychiatric annexe called Deos M (male) IV. Notorious was *Insurantio Officianalis Tyrannus Rex* (or Io), but there were also *Moneyneed*, *Calypto* and *Europa*. All wielded great power by their ability to determine which healers could visit the sick and lame. However, the most powerful was a golden goddess, the forever-fecund *Hygea Croesus*, who showered sick mortals with gold and silver, encouraging malingerers and medical fraud. Then there was Deva, the goddess of medicine so popular among the Greek hoplites (soldiers) and sailors; *Punitia Puritanica*, the god who punished doctors who had transgressed their oath; *Oberon Ministerion*, the fat-faced god of healing and toady of Apollo, the skin cancer god; and *Pharmakon*, the multi-headed god of therapeutics and poisons.

Classical cognoscenti know that the Greek word for drug, *pharmakon*, means both 'medicine' and 'poison', and that *iatros* means 'doctor'. As they had no Pensioner Benefit Scheme or Adverse Drug Advisory Committee, the Greeks knew that all drugs could be potentially lethal, as Socrates no doubt could attest from the Underworld. The most feared god was *Lex Argenti*, the goddess of the Law who was depicted as a blindfolded woman holding an imbalanced set of scales piled high on one side with silver talents. She was responsible for inculcating not only fear and dread in the mortal doctors below but, because of her awesome power, received financially crippling annual offerings of gold and silver in appeasement. Not surprisingly, her shrines were the most ornate.

With each full moon, *Pharmakon* sent his nubile young priestesses to breathe the polluted aer of *terra firma* to the uttermost corners of the then-known world, including a strange, god-forsaken continent in the antipodes. This and dust-bowl, girt by a sea, was named *Australis Nunquam*. It was so named, not only because of its southerly latitude, where the Constellation Crux hangs high in the sky, but also because the vanquished Aborigines called it the 'Never-never Land'. It also gained this strange name because the conquering potentate had stubbornly refused to apologise for their sorry plight.

These comely maidens would visit these dedicated mortals of the Hippocratic Oath and would fill rooms with enchanting spells. The poor iatros would then become intoxicated, not only with their beauty, but with the heady potions that secreted in their briefcases. For the *coup de grace*, the unsuspecting mortal would then, like a sacrificial bullock, be showered with gifts such as pens that could never be refilled, writing pads with the god's name inscribed, useless trinkets, drug samples to clutter up his office and offers of expensive meals and more (discretion, virtue and censorship prevent me from being too explicit). Embodied in each gift was a spell that acted on the unconscious mind so that, as with Bottom in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the male doctor would become enamoured of the comely nymph and henceforth would forever buy her potions.

HADES

But what of the Underworld, you may say. My dream was long and the second part must have occurred in another REM-epoch later that night:

On the outskirts of that seemingly insignificant Queensland town of Quilpie, a grain elevator descended to the realm of shade and gloom. I was ferried across that narrow, muddy river so familiar to Melbourne readers. As I had not an obelus on me, the ferryman (a dumpy, schizoid character with a shocking class-3 malocclusion and a dead-setter for

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sleep apnoea) fortunately accepted my Ajax card, and I was relieved to leave behind the ferocious seven-headed, blind-barking god, *Celebrex Furis Crudens*. On the far bank lay dismal Purgatory, the home of many of my former patients and a pack of black-gowned medical-negligence silks from Sydney, condemned to perpetually quaff \$6 bottles of cab. sav. while itching their lice-infested wigs. There was a cohort of hypertensive real estate agents, perpetually writing honest advertisements for the Saturday Courier Mail, and a legion of overweight, psychopathic, used-cart salesmen with narcolepsy.

There were but a few memorable medical miscreants who had sinned against the gods and had been punished in perpetuity, among them an orthopaedic surgeon condemned to perpetually fill out Medicare forms, only to find out that his secretary had written the wrong provider number and a proctologist condemned with the sentence of *Pruritus Ani in Eternitas*.

EPILOGUE

I awoke with what I think was probably a combination of sleep paralysis (or was it those potions?) and a hypnagogic hallucination. There was an investigator from the Health Insurance Commission sitting on my bed. However, my disquiet soon passed as my mother came into my bedroom and – freshly made cup of tea and biscuit in one hand, shooing him away with the other - drew back my curtains to streaming summer sunlight and told me it was time to get ready for school. Phew! Medicare, the Gods of Healing, the Underworld and all that stuff. It could never happen ... it was just a terrible nightmare.

Now I leave the reader to deliberate solemnly on my reveries, as I am at a loss what to make of them – especially as I come from the non-Freudian, reductionist, organic school of analytic polysomnography. Perhaps it could be the subject of a research grant funded by the Health Insurance Commission and, with at least two papers out of this, for the Annual Sleep Association Meeting. If you have any ideas, I can be contacted by email on...

Now, I must ring Dad, because he has been a GP for years and would probably know about such things.