
The once and future general practitioner

Jon Garvey watched him at work



DOCTOR: (*on phone*)... Well, I agree it sounds like a perforated ulcer. You'd better bring him along to the surgery, and I'll have the nurse boil up some needles and things. Yes, today if possible. (*Puts phone down*) Sorry to keep you, Mr... I say, it's Derek Pledgett isn't it? I don't think I've seen you since before the nuclear war, have I? No, that's right—I wondered why I didn't have any records. Well, what can I do for you?

PATIENT: Well, I feel so tired all the time, and I seem to keep getting colds.

DR: H'mm. Sounds straightforward but I'd better just examine you... (*miscellaneous professional noises*) Yes, that about clinches it. Pale; red throat; a few glands; bit of a spleen; bit of a liver—I think you've got a touch of leukaemia, old son.

PT: Leukaemia! But that's terrible, doctor. Are you sure?

DR: Oh, we've had a lot of it this winter. I've seen four or five cases this week already. No, common things are common.

PT: I don't want to teach you your job, doc, but... couldn't it be glandular fever?

DR: Good Lord, no! I've not seen a case for donkey's years. I'm afraid you're just going to have to live with it... er, that is to say... (*Pause*)

PT: Is there *nothing* you can do?

DR: Of course there is. There's always hope. Look, there's a big bed of purple flowers in the garden. Common Periwinkle. Have a bunch on me, on your way out. You can sprinkle them on your Grassabix every morning. Other than that... I don't know if that pharmaceutical chemist who's set up in practice down the track would have anything. I don't normally like to send people to quacks, but anything's worth a try.

PT: Yes, quite a lot of my friends have been going to him. They say... well, they say all you've got to offer is good advice.

DR: (*swallows hard*) Well, we doctors have had a rather limited arsenal since the drug-houses disappeared. You can't treat everything with bran and foxglove leaves. Still, we do our best. What else can I offer? It's no use suggesting radiotherapy. You'll have had that on the way here.

PT: So that's it, then.

DR: Yes, that's it. I'll give you a certificate for your overlord (*signs off with flourish of quill*). Oh, by the way—could you shut the airlock on the way out?■

Jon Garvey is a barefoot GP in South-East England