

“After all, small terrapins all look much the same... though ours would have to lose an eye to pass for his predecessor”

A funny thing happened on the way to a conference – and other stories

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A funny thing happened whilst your boss was away at a conference

BY VALERIE LUND

What is the difference between God and Professor Sir Donald Harrison? God is everywhere – Sir Donald is everywhere except at the Royal National Throat Nose and Ear Hospital!

This was a common joke about Sir Donald, who was much in demand at international meetings. When asked who did all the work when he was away, Harrison would truthfully reply, “The same people who do it when I am there”.

I met David Howard on the Professional Unit at the Royal National Throat, Nose and Ear Hospital. Sir Donald had flexed considerable muscle to divert him there rather than to Great Ormond Street, which had been David's next scheduled post at the end of his ENT training. This was primarily due to David's extensive previous experience in general surgery, A&E, orthopaedics and critical care which made him an ideal candidate to deal with the prodigious head and neck surgical workload. There was very little that he could not deal with or devise a solution for, and he did it all with irrepressible cheer, often dressed in flamboyantly cut and coloured suits. This led one senior FRCS examiner to remark that David was the only person they could recall ever passing the exam in a pale blue suit.

David's relocation to the Professional Unit was not entirely what he would have chosen but did allow him to take over

a lot of the major surgery, freeing Sir Donald to roam the world even more than before. Whilst he was away, David and I were left to mind the shop, including the care of Harrison's large aquarium, replete with many tropical fish and a one-eyed terrapin. The fish were very low maintenance but the terrapin had to be hand-fed top quality Marks & Spencer prawns, greedily snapping them from our fingers. Tragically, one morning we went to feed the terrapin only to find that he had turned up his toes, thereby raising a serious ethical dilemma. Should we own up to this catastrophe when Harrison returned? Or should we quietly replace him? After all, small terrapins all look much the same... though ours would have to lose an eye to pass for his predecessor.

Rest assured, we never seriously considered maiming a terrapin. We chose the former path, which prompted the professor's response: “I never liked the little bugger anyway”. The terrapin was not replaced.

I should mention that whilst David was able to deal with just about anything, initially this did not include a stropky SHO who already had everything under her control and did not welcome any interference. We were immediately at loggerheads but, as so often happens, admiration rapidly overcame irritation. And to quote *Jane Eyre*: eventually, many years later, ‘Reader, I married him.’

This series of stories is dedicated to those of you with whom some of these moments were shared (or endured) and, above all, to my amazing and long-suffering husband, David Howard. Most of you know him as an exceptional head and neck surgeon but, since Covid, he has been involved in a large multi-speciality international charitable project reintroducing negative pressure non-invasive breathing support which could transform the management of respiratory disease all round the world. If you are interested, please visit www.exovent.org (or scan the QR code) for further information and, if you enjoy the stories, please consider donating to the charity through the Exovent website (Click DONATE on the home page drop down menu).



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