

# Letter from . . . Chicago

## Facts

GEORGE DUNEA

"What I want is facts," pontificated the tyrannical Mr Gradgrind in his school, enjoining his instructors to teach only facts and to stick to facts alone, to plant nothing else and root out everything but facts, for nothing else will ever be of use to these boys and girls. Hence the predicament of poor Sissy Jupe, girl number 20, who could not even define a horse, let alone give a list of 20 useful facts about it.<sup>1</sup> But we doctors also have a healthy respect for facts, especially if we belong to the oppressed generation that had to learn by rote the mouthparts of the cockroach, the characteristics of monocotyledons, the relations of the pterygo-palatine fossa, the difference between the meta and the ortho position, and the results of the experiments carried out on Pikes Peak. But that was in the dark days before instant communication; for now if a 10 year old girl has a baby in one's own hospital the news may travel faster across the world by satellite than across the medical complex by the bush telegraph.

With this proviso in mind, I note that this girl is the youngest ever to give birth naturally in Chicago (though 4 months older than another girl who had a cesarean section here in 1964, and almost 5 years older than Lina Medina, the 1939 record holder from Peru). She had begun menstruating a year earlier and had not known she was pregnant until hours before delivery, when she was taken to the emergency room because of pain in the back. While the mother and her 3800 g baby are doing well, the police's interest in both the 45 year old uncle and the babysitter's son underscores the growing problem of sexual abuse of children.

Referred to as a conspiracy of silence and more prevalent where there is overcrowding, unemployment, and poverty, sexual abuse of children is believed to occur at a rate of 250 000 per year. According to these estimates one in four women and one in nine men, from all classes, races, and ethnic groups, may have been sexually molested as children. In most cases the abuser is a relative, friend, or neighbour, and only 16% are strangers. Most incidents are not reported, especially if the child has been threatened to keep quiet or thinks he or she will not be believed. Among incestuous relations, those between siblings are the most common, but those between fathers and daughters are the most traumatic, leaving the young women ashamed, afraid, and often traumatised for life. A growing number of such cases are now beginning to come to light. Some occur in families where the mother is mentally ill; the father and daughter rely on each other for emotional support, and what begins with innocent hugging and cuddling eventually progresses to full sexual relations. In recent years several incest groups have been founded to help these troubled families, and much has been written on how to recognise and treat the problem—including an article on forced silence and on the psychological problems of adults who were abused as children

and commanded or threatened to remain silent.<sup>2</sup> Such victims may have the utmost trouble in unburdening themselves of an experience that festers on as "a secondary trauma of enormous importance," as they find that "the only way to make sense of an otherwise meaningless, horrifying assault is to cast it in terms of shame and guilt."

### Concept of childhood

Yet in this context we learn from a recent book by Neil Postman that the whole concept of childhood is relatively new, unknown in the ancient world and in the middle ages, first invented during the renaissance but fully accepted only some 200 years ago. There was certainly no childhood during the middle ages, when people lived together in close and overcrowded quarters, unrepelled by body odours and contact, undisgusted by the sight of bodily functions carried out in public. Without childhood there can of course be no child abuse, which explains why behaviour that now would land one in prison for 30 years was once regarded as normal. Furthermore, Mr Postman suggests that without the notion of shame and adult secrecy the concept of childhood cannot survive, and he believes that this is about to happen in our only too explicit society.<sup>3</sup>

No such problems occur at the other extreme of life, for by the year 2000 some 35 million Americans will be over the age of 65 and seven million will be over 85. Who will pay for the care of all these old and often infirm people is a question that comes up frequently in discussions about the financial future of Medicare and social security. By 1990 the mere cost of nursing home care is estimated to reach \$76 billion, and the overall financial projections are discouraging. Again and again comes up the issue of placing limitations on the expenditures for caring for the infirm and the hopelessly ill. So that, while Sir William Osler was merely joking when he suggested that all men should be chloroformed at the age of 60,<sup>4</sup> Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado was apparently dead serious when he recently said that terminally ill old people have "a duty to die and get out of the way."

Among other facts we learn that most Chicago café owners do not mind their customers smoking cigarettes but object to young women breast feeding in public, a dichotomy interpreted as indicating a growing perception of the breast as a sex symbol rather than as a source of nurturing. Meanwhile health advocates are pleased that the Nestlé Company has agreed to comply with the World Health Organisation codes for baby foods, as well as eliminating from their advertisements "pictures of babies and words that may idealise the use of infant formulae." There have been reports about a link between fluorescent lights and skin cancer, a suggestion regarded by most authorities as causing unnecessary anxiety among office workers. Consumerists will take note of a study indicating a high risk in low tar cigarettes, and will applaud the Food and Drug Administration's decision requiring the listing of the sodium content of many processed

foods by 1985 and of calories and other nutritional details by 1990. They would like to ban the diet pill phenylpropanolamine and forbid the sale of the sweetener aspartamate, but would approve supporting research into the development of so called orphan drugs for rare diseases. They would also go along with the banning of fake purported cures for the acquired immune deficiency syndrome, and presumably would not object to the prosecution of an entrepreneur who sold Japanese tea as a cure for cancer, arthritis, and burns, and of a man who helped students to obtain false medical school transcripts, evaluation forms, and examination diplomas for foreign graduates. Also praiseworthy are the efforts to modify the design of an automatic electric bed that resulted in the tragic death by suffocation of two small children. Less encouraging is a report in a glamour magazine of a study of young American women indicating that 75% considered themselves fat, 55% had resorted to diet pills, and 15% had tried to lose weight by self induced vomiting. Some of these young women were obese, but many were actually underweight.

Then we find that Chicago, called the "windy city" for very good reasons, is no longer "the second city," this distinction having passed to Los Angeles. According to the 1982 census, Los Angeles now has 3 022 247 people, against Chicago's 2 990 000. But, while Chicago itself has lost 250 000 people in the past few years, the total population of six county Chicagoland is growing and now exceeds seven million. Other statistics indicate that in the United States as a whole German is now the most common ancestry (28%), with the Irish coming second (24%), and the English third (22%)—but people of British Isles descent would still constitute a majority if counted all together. Spanish is now the second most frequently spoken language (7.7 million), followed by German, Italian, Polish, and French. According to another report, four out of five Americans are satisfied with their jobs, and one third of these are very satisfied; but many women are seemingly displeased with their noses, because nose operations are the most frequent form of plastic surgery, followed by breast augmentation and surgery on the eyes, abdomen, chin, buttocks, acne scars, and wrinkles. Serious crime in America is down by 7%, for which the Reagan administration would like to take credit; but the use of hard drugs has trebled in Chicago, for which the mayor decidedly assumes no blame.

### Mental illness

Then there was another study, which found that patients recovered more quickly after operations if their hospital window looked out on trees and grass rather than on a brick wall. A computerised study of mentally ill patients confirmed the old belief that the severity of their illness varies with the moon, and that many psychotics exhibit their strangest behaviour when the moon is full. A woman had a cardiac arrest from being scared to death by listening to a passage from *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. Some doctors were almost scared to death when a "dead" man coughed just as they were about to remove his kidneys for organ donation. News of the giant panda's death at the Washington Zoo have been reported as being greatly exaggerated. In Texas a paediatric nurse was found guilty on charges of killing at least one infant, and possibly more, by injecting them with succinylcholine. And, on a brighter note, surgeons have successfully separated the brains shared by two Siamese twins; have attached a man's left hand to where his right hand used to be; have partially restored the hearing of some 200 people by implanting electrodes and magnetic discs in their inner ears; and have performed a series of eye operations on a 79 year old man, blind for 40 years, so that he could look at his wife. He was not disappointed—it was love at first sight.

I close with an apology to one of my correspondents, a medical student, for my incomplete review of the literature of flatology in one of my previous letters. How could I have missed the famous study showing that Boston baked beans

increased gaseous emissions, largely carbon dioxide, from a control level of 17 to 172 ml per hour, with pork and beans, green lima beans, and mature lima beans yielding intermediate values. No enhancement or suppression of gas formation occurred when methylcellulose was added in this study, where gas was collected by rectal tube for 30 minutes postprandially in six volunteers.<sup>5</sup> Less fortunate were the rats whose gastrointestinal tracts were ligated at both ends and excised to show that antibiotics did not substantially modify the effects of a bean diet. Intriguing also was the suggestion that the excess production of carbon dioxide was the result of pancreatic trypsin inhibition, the excess bicarbonate in the pancreatic juice then becoming neutralised by the hydrochloric acid from the stomach.<sup>5</sup> Not that this explains Pythagoras's prejudice against beans, nor does it excuse the medical student, on whom in traditional professorial manner I must shift the blame for sending all those reprints on the ethical, aesthetic, olfactory, auditory, ballistic, flogistic, and sociopolitical implications of flatology. If I ever am to reach my 100th Letter from Chicago (and there is still one to go), I must avoid discussion of problems that might arise on formal occasions, during the slow movement of the Prague symphony, under bed covers, in a stationary lift, in church, in committee, or in love. Nor should I discuss the studies describing the effects of caviar, salami, or sauerkraut on the gas chromatogram. For such details have no more place in a scientific journal than Mr Reagan's advocacy of democracy and free speech in the *Peking Daily Herald*. But, for those who must insist, references are available on request.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Dickens C. *Hard Times*. New York: Signet Classic, 1961.
- <sup>2</sup> Lister ED. Forced silence: a neglected dimension of trauma. *Am J Psychiatry* 1982;139:872-6.
- <sup>3</sup> Postman N. *The disappearance of childhood*. New York: Laurel, 1982.
- <sup>4</sup> Roland CG. The infamous William Osler. *JAMA* 1965;193:98-100.
- <sup>5</sup> Anonymous. Beans and flatus. *Nutrition Reviews* 1967;25:297-8.

---

*My partners and I have been impressed by the large number of slightly bizarre symptoms brought to us by the nursing staff of a nearby large mental hospital, especially those staff who work at nights. The symptoms consist usually of dizziness, light headedness, parasthesiae, etc. We have always concluded that the problem occurred because the night staff do not develop normal circadian rhythms. Furthermore, many of them appear to supplement their earnings with daytime working on their days off. Apart from advising the patients to change their lifestyle or arrange to work on the day shift, there is little we can do. Are the symptoms due to a disturbance in circadian rhythm and if so what treatment is advised?*

We are fitted by evolution for a regular lifestyle and if we flout our circadian rhythms by jet travel or irregular work and sleep schedules we inevitably suffer. Disturbances of digestion and sleep are common but so are nervous symptoms, depressed mood, fatigue, and poorer judgment. These symptoms of intolerance make it impossible for some people to sustain shift work, even for some who have been doing it for years.<sup>1</sup> Shift work apart, people who choose irregular times for going to bed and getting up are less cheerful, less energetic, and less quick in reaction times than those who adopt a regular lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> Some staff who work in mental hospitals have taken up the work in the hope of finding a better understanding of human problems, and especially their own, so the doctor must always consider the individual and not just circadian rhythms. In so far as symptoms may arise from disturbance of rhythms, there is no treatment except the resumption of a regular lifestyle, and I am sure that drugs should be avoided.—IAN OSWALD, professor of psychiatry, Edinburgh.

- <sup>1</sup> Reinberg A, Andlauer P, De Prins J, Malbecq W, Vieux N, Bourdeleau P. Desynchronization of the oral temperature circadian rhythm and intolerance to shift work. *Nature* 1984;308:272-4.
- <sup>2</sup> Taub JM. Behavioural and psychophysiological correlates of irregularity in chronic sleep routines. *Biological Psychology* 1978;7:37-53.