

Peter Cooper 1917–2008: a tribute

Peter Cooper, FRPharmS, who wrote as **Onlooker** in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* for more years than anyone on the current staff can remember, died peacefully on 10 February at the age of 90 years. By way of tribute we republish a selection of his writings

On culture . . .

The proper use of words, in whatever context, is vitally important to the only articulate species of primate, as we should do well to remember: their misuse, every student of propaganda knows, can stir remarkably crude and mischievous emotions. Moreover, deep in the literature to which Greek is the gateway, lie the main roots of western civilisation and perhaps even now we are either Greeks or barbarians. Pharmacy students, it has been said, would profit from a closer acquaintance with Latin, true enough, but in a wider sense the Romans gave us very little they had not absorbed from the Greeks. Certainly the literature of Rome owed nearly everything to the people Rome conquered. The distinctive legacy of the Romans, a legal code and a military government, it would be rash to equate with culture. A wide and healthy culture, with the sturdy character that emerges from it, is singularly lacking today. Scientists, pharmacists, need a greater length and breadth of vision than anyone; life extends so much further than the average scientist's horizon. Not the technique alone, but the philosophy that checks and guides it, enter into the picture. Hellenism itself seems to be in eclipse though I wonder sometimes if the time is not drawing near for its re-emergence. It would be glorious indeed if the study of Greek words, and consequently the ideals of Greece in her Golden Age, were to find some part in the curriculum of pharmacy. (11 July 1953)

On eye make-up . . .

According to the Kama Sutra, if a fine powder of *Tabernaemontana coronaria*, *Costus speciosus* and *Flacourtia cataphracta* and "applied to the wick of a lamp which is made to burn with the oil of blue vitriol, the black pigment or lamp black produced therefrom, when applied to the eyelashes, has the effect of making a person look lovely". That the same idea was current long before is evident in a painting from the Palace of Knossos in Crete dating from about 1600BC and showing three young women with carefully pencilled eyelashes and lids is indeed one of the most effective ways of enhancing an otherwise uninteresting face. That it has its hazards appears from a report in a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which describes a girl of 16 who complained of intense headache. In the course of investigations she was given full x-rays which showed bilateral calcification of the orbits. This was worrying, and provoked neurological and ophthalmological investigations which brought negative results. At this point two aspects of the case were noted. The girl had a very stressful home life, which would



well explain her headaches, and she wore heavy eye make-up. When this was removed the x-ray signs of orbital calcification disappeared. Further examples of 25 samples of eye cosmetics indicated that four were strongly radio-opaque. They contained bismuth salts, iron oxide and talc. So the mimicking of pathological changes in the orbit by applied opaque materials is another snag for the unwary radiologist (1 April 1978).

On bow ties . . .

To judge from a brief note in *New Scientist* of 31 October [1985], a searching sartorial question is going round the laboratories of Europe: why do scientists wear bow ties? There are supplementary questions which spring to mind: do scientists wear bow ties? and how many scientists do? However, it is claimed that, for a chemist at any rate, a bow tie is preferable to a flowing, dangling tie because it does not dip into the brew or whip itself across the lip of a reagent bottle. There is nothing more discouraging than to discover that ties fall into dust after having been wiped with nitric acid. And it is obvious that anyone who regularly agitates a separator does well to wear a flowing tie only under a high-necked lab coat where it will not get hitched up in the shaking path and even turn on the tap to waste irreplaceable material. Bow ties are less troublesome. The old scientists who used to stalk the lab floor wearing a stiff wing collar and formal bow tie were unworried by what was on the bench. Their only problem was to bend their necks sufficiently forward to see what lay beyond their shirt fronts. They did however appreciate the value of the bow tie at formal dinners, where a flowing tie might have flapped in the soup and contaminated the dresses of their neighbours.

I imagine that the present generation of television scientists wear bow ties to ensure that they are not mistaken for pop stars. It is noteworthy that there is a considerable difference between a genuine hand-tied tie and one of those upstart gadgets which is sewn together and merely clips on. Artistically there is much in favour of the genuine bow tie, whose variable characteristics enable the wearer to style it at need, balanced, staggered, floppy or eccentric, according to personality. Yet I really wonder how many scientists off the screen and in the lab wear a tie at all in these permissive days. The open neck blouse or shirt is almost universal to all cultures; the very dressy may fill the gap with a colourful cravat or scarf. It is in the office, never in the lab, that you will find a woman scientist wearing a tie of any size or shape. The ideal garment for both sexes is the high-necked lab coat; what is underneath is nobody's business. It is cuffs which worry me; unless they are tight at the wrist they present a real hazard and will not last long (23 November 1985).

On prayer power . . .

In *New Scientist* for 13 November 1999 is a report suggesting that organised prayer may assist recovery from illness even in circumstances where the patient is unaware that he or she is being prayed for. This is an interesting aspect of prayer, which is often considered to derive its efficacy from the fact that the person praying is achieving a powerful concentration of mind in the process, which may therefore have incalculable results.

A double-blind study was performed in Kansas City, Missouri, on a group of patients who were enrolled in a coronary care unit over a period of 12 months. As they were admitted, patients received a record number and those with even numbers were prayed for, unknown to themselves, by members of a volunteer Christian body who were given only the individual's first name, and not his or her enrolment number.

Variables measured during the trial included degree of fever and whether or not antibiotic therapy was being given. The outcome in 466 patients who were the subjects of prayer was significantly better than that in the 524 others who acted as controls.

Criticism has been raised over the possibility of bias in the assessment of the results in such a trial, if there any possibility that the confidentiality of the numbering system can be breached. It has also been suggested that a similar study might be undertaken using as subjects and investigators members of an organisation which is by definition sceptical on the subject of paranormal phenomena (5 February 2000).