

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking ...

Since retiring I have taken up public speaking. My subject is the fluctuating character of the high street since I began my career over half a century ago. From my days as an apprentice I cover the time during the 1960s when I was a pharmacy manager up to when I became a proprietor. The reactions of different audiences to my talk has caused me to adapt my material. I now include more anecdotal and nostalgic items.

Frequently I address gatherings of people of my own generation, but my aim is to try to entertain everyone. I have learnt to leave my hobby horses outside the venue. Everyone knows that "fings ain't what they used to be".

Apparently the concentration span of the average person is about 20 minutes. If I can cut down on statistics and include lots of anecdotes (hopefully humorous ones) I can hold the attention of my audience for longer. After a lifetime in community pharmacy I have a repertoire of such stories.

It seems nostalgia is becoming more prevalent. Following two hip replacement operations I convalesced at Birdsgrove House and met other pharmacists, some well below retirement age, who also enjoyed journeys down memory lane.

I was recently invited to try my hand at after-dinner speaking and realised that economic arguments and factual details were less acceptable. With guests sitting back in the afterglow of good food and wine, could I risk boring them with a diatribe on the impact of abolishing resale price maintenance or the development of antibiotics from when penicillin first appeared on our dispensary shelves?

My original talk included an account of my early days at a prestigious pharmacy in my home town when I was aged 17. I decided to enlarge on

this. . . . As I stepped over the threshold for the first time I remember looking up and seeing written in gold letters above the door that they stocked "personal toiletries", "hygiene requisites" and a mysterious commodity called "surgical sundries". I was suitably impressed but unprepared for a rude awakening. Soon I was guided to a trap-door behind the counter and despatched to the cellar. There I was tutored in the art of packing bottles of the company's speciality medicines. There was an esteemed remedy for gastritis, biliousness and embarrassing flatulent wind, as well as a bronchial cough mixture which the label said was "famous". The craft involved choosing the correct size of cork, tying a pleated paper cap over the neck of the bottle and neatly wrapping the container in white demy, to be sealed surreptitiously with red sealing wax. . . . This type of narrative seemed to please my audience.

I enlarge on this with a lyrical description of the exotic perfumes that charged the atmosphere behind the medicines counter in those days. I recall opening one of those mahogany drawers with Latin titles and finding, behind the label inscribed "Ichthycol", sheets of isinglass. There are occasions now when members of audience make audible interjections, such as: "Brimstone and treacle! Ugh!"

These modifications to the script help to keep my audience awake. Aware that an emphasis on nostalgia can give a slightly romantic version of how pharmacy was practised when I began my career, I make a point of adding that this was not a golden age of medicine. Many prescriptions in those days, I remind them, were for purgatives, once regarded as the universal panacea for every medical condition known to mankind. Nearly everyone nods . . . in agreement, of course.— *Contributed*.