

And winter his delights

Alan Wiseman, a locum pharmacist, recalls winters as a medical representative in Surrey

Twice, before closing the pharmacy, I trudged out to empty the waste-paper baskets into the wheelie-bin in the yard. I realised, on the second visit, that my footprints in the snow, formed just three minutes before, had already disappeared under a fresh coating of snow. It was then I became aware that this was no gentle snowfall. As I gingerly drove home, I wondered why I had chosen a profession that demands we get to work on time, irrespective of personal health or the state of the roads, and thought back to some past conditions.

Older readers might recall the winter of 1962/63 when heavy snow fell on New Year's Eve and the air temperature did not rise above freezing until mid-March. As a result, even main roads became practically impassable for three months and, as a medical representative in those days, I rapidly (as did all the survivors) became an expert at handling a car on snow- and ice-bound roads. I believe I was the only rep who did not damage his company car during that winter, though more by luck than judgement. In favour of an unscathed car, admittedly, was the fact that hedges and verges were permanently coated in a thick tunic of snow obviating scratches to the paintwork whenever the vehicle slid off the road — one day it happened to me four times in one three-mile stretch of country road. On another occasion, I inadvisedly chose a short cut between two main roads and proceeded with wheels in ruts created by a tractor, frozen snow rubbing against the sump throughout. Half way along, I visualised ending my journey (and possibly career) in a farmyard! Some 20 or 30 yards behind me a fellow intrepid motorist had, clearly, come to the same conclusion because I could see him roaring with laughter as, indeed, was I. Fortunately, for both of us, the tractor's tracks emerged on a partially cleared main road.

Sacks and spades

Shortly after, I stayed at a hotel in Abingdon, which I used as a home base when travelling in the wilds of north Berkshire. One morning, I set off for Wallingford, following closely behind a snow plough. Only 20 yards behind me the road was again totally blocked, not by fresh falling snow (there was not a cloud in the sky), but by latent snow blowing off the Chilterns. After one call I decided to take the next snow plough out of town and was, apparently, the last vehicle to leave for six weeks — the authorities decided no longer to attempt to keep one road open and, thereafter, supplies were flown in by helicopter. I wonder, now, how the local pharmacists managed to maintain their service.

There were compensations, however. Traffic congestion was nil and a unique fellowship of the road existed. We all carried

sacks and spades and there was always someone to help you out of the ditch into which you had helplessly slid. And no one minded if you visited wearing the ubiquitous wellington boots and the most unprofessional overcoat, muffler and woolly hat. For a young man, on the threshold of a career, it was all great fun — even in an E-type Anglia with a hopeless heater that required a lit paraffin-heater under the engine block every night to ensure a start in the mornings.

Camaraderie

In another Berkshire town, the Council decided not to waste money on street clearing services, and frozen snow, a foot deep, blocked even main roads. The only answer was to park on the outskirts and walk. One GP claimed I was the first person he had seen in his surgery for weeks and was glad to have a chat. The GP lived at the foot of a steep hill. While I had managed to manoeuvre the car down the hill, there was absolutely no chance of getting it back up unaided. But such was the camaraderie of the country at that time that the GP, his wife and half a dozen neighbours banded together to get me on my way. I wove sideways up the steep slope, waving back out of the open window as they all cheered me on my way. Would that happen today?

In later years, when I owned my own pharmacy, I was, again, faced with the prospect of getting to work when all my friends and neighbours had telephoned their offices to notify their absence.

Why was I the only one who had to get to work — and on time? The pharmacy was only about four miles away, but getting there consisted entirely of a cross-country journey along narrow lanes, which would be the last to be gritted by the authorities. I am proud to say that the only occasion I was late opening the shop (and only by two minutes) was because of a snow-plough bogged down in a drift, completely blocking the road and necessitating an alternative, longer route.

The same country road presented a problem on another occasion. One morning I got out of my car to examine a huge bank of snow, some five feet high, completely blocking the route. On the far side an equally perplexed motorist also stood contemplating the prospects. Meanwhile, two cars drew up behind me and we all considered the options. There is a lot to be said for an old and rather battered Volvo Estate. Having persuaded the others to back up some distance in both directions, I reversed about 20 yards, put my car into bottom gear, and charged. The Volvo flew through the drift, sideways, in a whirl of snow and ice and behold, the road was open again.

And, having reached the pharmacy, what then? While most of our premises are, these days, warm and well-lit, there were (and still



are) exceptions. How many dispensaries are still heated by evil-smelling paraffin or calor-gas contraptions? I once owned a pharmacy warmed by an enormous gas-boiler. This thumped away until it reached a crescendo, at which point a brave member of staff would race to switch it off before it exploded.

A few proprietors, conscious, no doubt, of their fuel bills, are positively parsimonious with regard to the comfort of their staff. On one dreadful occasion, not many years back, not only was no heating allowed in the shop where I worked as a locum during the coldest winter snap but the owner's wife insisted that the shop door remain open throughout "in case a customer thinks we are closed". With the staff working in overcoats and gloves, and having examined the chilblains on one poor girl's hands, I had had enough. Finding the ambient temperature to be 48F, I notified the local health authority, which subsequently condemned the conditions.

Were weather extremes worse in those days? In the south-east, at least, we do not seem to experience the abominable conditions of yesteryear, whether global warming is a fait accompli or not. No doubt those who practise in the most rural and exposed areas of the country will find my experiences commonplace, but this was semi-rural, gentle Surrey! Just how much effort should pharmacists make to ensure their excellent service continues? I suppose if it is your livelihood you have no option.