

It's a god's life being a doctor

Doctor or deity? It depends how you play it, says Dr Jon Garvey.

WHEN I WAS a child, I spoke as a *child*, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child, and I wanted to be an archaeologist, until Auntie Dorothy, who knew about such things, told me they spent all day in a hole.

So I decided to become a doctor — or at least a Junior Doctor, with a pair of plastic tweezers and some plastic 'Rennies' — because doctors made people better, which was a good thing.

My career was interrupted by my brother dismembering my stethoscope and hiding the evidence under the bed. But in the sixth form it became clear to me that you had to do something after you left school. With my range of subjects, it was a choice between vivisection and making people better, which still seemed a good thing — and you got to drive a Volvo.

When I was a man, I put away childish things and bought an electronic stethoscope.

It was in the third year of my hospital career that I began to realise I was turning into a god. I went to visit my wife and two new bouncing babies in the maternity unit that I had served faithfully for a year. But to my chagrin,

wherever I went unit doors kept slamming in my face.

It only slowly dawned that this was because I wasn't using my hands to open them, but trusting the previous users to hold them open for me — and I wasn't wearing my white coat! I was taught in my medical school that the white coat is to keep blood and faeces off the doctor. This is quite erroneous. It keeps the less divine part of our nature off the patient.

Bereft of our white coats, we need some other means to assert our otherness, which explains the proliferation of uniforms for non white-coat doctors; sports jacket and cavalry twills for GPs, and those rather characteristic striped shirts for consultants. And half-moon specs for either. Incidentally, when did you last have a *patient* come to see you with half-moon specs?

It seems even demigods need diplomas nowadays, and so it is not surprising that we are given a dazzling choice. We can, for example, sit the Diploma in Child Health, which is essential to tell mumps from measles; the Diploma of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which helps us understand how hospital doctors deliver our patients' babies; or the Membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners, which helps us conduct non-directive consultations instead of just listening to our patients.

It soon becomes clear that we are a rather special sort of mortal, but there are trials. Occasionally we may hear it suggested that we are merely a service industry. Even worse, we may suddenly

realise that most people spend 99.9 per cent of their time *not* under the care of a doctor, although this may be partially remedied by recalling some of these backsliders for screening, and so on.

Nevertheless, there may still be some time to spare, so we start joining committees. Many lesser mortals also try to join committees. The trouble is there aren't enough to go round because the doctors are on them.

By this time we will truly be hidden from our patients in light inaccessible, for we will have left, half-an-hour before they come, for an 'important meeting'. From this point, of course, it is only two steps to the MBE and Nirvana.

'Daddy's going to work, to make different peoples better,' says my two year-old.

No, son — I've put away childish things.

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