

The buck stops here

Dr Jon Garvey with a tip on the right time to accept responsibility

ONE of the major curses of our society, causing neurotic disorders, the Toxteth riots, and probably the deterioration of the climate as well, is the national pastime of not being responsible for anything.

There seems no better phrase for this than 'passing the buck', although this conjures up more the schoolboy malefactor wriggling out of his guilt, or 'It wasn't me wot done it it was my mate Sid wot done a bunk 'e done it I seen 'im', as my father used to say.

Today, rather, we are confronted by the shop assistant who says she doesn't have the article we want, and neither offers a suitable substitute nor suggests where we might find one.

In the medical industry, especially, this attitude has become a way of life, and inhospitals, whose size pressures them to function as sympathetically as leucotomised dinosaurs, it is rampant.

On the wards nurses are the standard-bearers of the habit. When I was a senior house officer, a new treatment card was introduced which had a special letter code to be employed if, for any reason, a dose of a drug were omitted.

For example, R signified patient refusal, OW that he was off the ward, and so on. We junior staff soon coined another code for the most common reason: the IWO syndrome. If one found no record of a drug having been given, and asked any nurse from the sister downwards about it, one could be guaranteed the response 'I wasn't on'.

Hospital administration is the worst offender, though, and it is the example which fills me with most despair about the country's future.

I discovered that one of the radiators in our hospital flat had a loose bracket, a plug having worked out of the plaster. I dropped in on the accommodation manager to ask for it to be fixed.

He was an ex-army man with the permanently-hunted look of the foreman of a Gulag logging party, and used to puff away at a larger Meerschmummet each time one met him.

He agreed to get one of the lads to look at it that day. Two days later, two carpenters turned up to assess the task, decided it would be easy, and went away. The end of the week saw two different chippies arrive to do the job, but on surveying their assignment they concluded that, since the radiator was screwed to a wall, it was work for the plasterer, so they went away.

When the plasterers (a pair, of course) turned up after a few days, they agreed it was their province, and went away to tell the plumber to come and remove the radiator so they could do it.

This led to some delay, as the plumber was obviously in demand, but after only two or three calls to the Gulag foreman, one arrived after a fortnight or so. But he had not reckoned on it being such a large radiator, and said he would have to come back with a colleague.

At this my wife, normally as mild as the Good Wife of the "Book of Proverbs", became incensed enough to scare him into phoning for his mate, and it was done. It now remained to do the original job — that is, to secure the bracket.

Despite weekly phone calls, and repeated visits to Mr Meerschmummet, we could not procure the plasterer.

Finally I decided that rough tactics were called for and got my wife to phone, whereupon the plumbers arrived hotfoot to put the radiator back. They were most disappointed that the bracket had not been fixed, and promised to get in touch with the plasterers.

But by now I too had lost patience, and although I was on-



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call, and expecting an acute abdomen — with patient attached — I took the opportunity of nipping home, and while the tea was brewing, removed the offending plug and replaced it with a new plastic one.

I then called the plumbers, who were most dubious that a non-professional could have put up a bracket in the right place, and for a while I thought I might have precipitated a strike.

However, I had the feeling that the little army man was quite pleased about it.

I have prided myself that the surgery I work in is free from the buck-passing syndrome, until I realised that our patients are so used to being fobbed off with an endless succession of taped messages if they ring for a doctor that, when I am on-call from above the surgery, they actually sound disappointed when I answer.

'Oh . . . I was expecting a machine,' they say. I usually reply that I am a machine, but I doubt they believe me.

If people continue in this apparent desire actually to collude in the national malady, they may not bother to come to us, and we'll be out of a job.

Well, if they do it won't be my responsibility.