

Foreign customs start closer than you think

Dr Jon Garvey, who would be off up the A1 tomorrow if it weren't for the mushy peas, compares doctors' lives in the North and South

ONE morning I was greeted by my fellow senior house officer, a New Zealander. 'Heckit?' he said, inquiringly.

'I beg your pardon?' I replied, thinking I had misheard.

'Heckit?' he repeated. Perhaps this was some antipodean form of 'dammit', or Maori for 'I hope you enjoyed your evening off'. I looked blank.

He pointed to my newly-shorn locks. 'You've hed a heckit!'

Doctors from Asia or Africa are required to pass a stiff language exam before they can practise here, but this example shows that these people who have usually studied hard to learn the tongue are not the ones who need screening.

There are cultural barriers far nearer home which impede communication, and if a highly-trained doctor such as myself cannot understand what is said, how much less will the long-suffering patient?

We need not go as far as New Zealand to encounter cultural divides. One of our partners is leaving to take up a post in his native North Country, and whatever his excuses about wanting to try single-practice and so on, we all know that he really wants to return to his own tribe: the Danelaw is just as potent a boundary as when the Norsemen were on the rampage.

Equally, I suppose, I would be somewhat hesitant to take a job in those far-flung regions farther north, even, than Birmingham — where my ancestors once settled before they retreated to the sunnier climes of Surrey.

However, I recently had the opportunity to observe the life of these people at first hand, when a GP friend in Yorkshire offered us his house while he was away on holiday. Since our planned tour of eastern European mausoleums had gone by the board — what with changing jobs twice in six months, selling our house to numerous people and finally

back to ourselves, taking the college exam and so on — this was a godsend.

The week we were due to go, our friend phoned to say he had broken his leg and would not be going away, but we learned a lesson in northern hospitality when he asked us to stay anyway. So our large clan was added to his as we prepared to find out what sort of life they live up there.

At first sight, There looks much like Here, but we soon realised we were in a different world when, visiting a nature trail, we found it littered not with Coke cans, as in the South, but with empty tins of Brasso.

The town, too, was different. Every other shop seemed to be a barber's, with the heady fragrance of brilliantine wafting through the open doors as it used to in the South before they all became his'n'hers unisex hair boutiques.

Food is different as well. Faggots we have heard of here, though in our house, following our three-year-old's description, they are 'sandcastle meat'. But they also consume large quantities of mushy peas, which, as well as coming in tins, may be had from Findus, fresh-frozen within minutes of processing. Mercifully, our friend seemed to eschew these local delicacies.

These things are superficial. The real difference lies in the people, who are renowned for their friendliness to strangers. The nice lady who sat next to us, having just missed her bus because she'd been waiting for the fishmonger's to open so she could just get a little bit of fish for her lunch, would have been only too willing to show us the bunion that explained why she was wearing a bedroom slipper on one foot and a shoe on the other — but happily her ankle oedema was so gross she couldn't get the thing off.

Strangely, I am told that this forthcomingness is far less



obvious when such natives go to see the doctor — then they become merely blunt. Perhaps, this reflects a greater social distance between doctor and patient than in the egalitarian South. Certainly, what with lower house costs and so on, the northern doctor is financially better-off than his southern counterpart.

I had always assumed that the fact the majority of contributors to PULSE came from the lower end of Britain was due to the fact that writing had not been invented elsewhere. Not so! Northern GPs have no time to write, with exotic leisure pursuits filling the idle hours between surgeries, and do not need to.

They don't know they're born, these northerners. All in all, I'd forget the cultural differences any day; pack my bags, and head on up the A1 to join in the good life.

The only thing that keeps me here is the thought of mushy peas.

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