

# Viva day – or a bit of the verbals

**The RCGP oral exams were a grilling which left Dr Jon Garvey well-toasted and slimmer by 5lb.**

THE Royal College of General Practitioners, as one approaches it for the oral part of the examination, looks exactly like every other royal college, and a fair number of commercial hotels, except for its disquieting proximity to the burnt-out shell of the Iranian Embassy. Around the corner stands the deserted London base of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and I gained the impression that if the world situation follows its present course, the college would soon have the whole street to itself.

Entering, I am handed a name-badge, lest I forget such details in the fever of the occasion, and I am ushered into an anteroom where a genuine minion offers me genuine coffee. I accept, gratefully, reasoning that I need all the help I can get. Looking around, the college bears a disappointing resemblance to the other colleges internally, as well as externally, though it is, perhaps, a little less like a masonic temple than the Royal College of Surgeons, where Ionic columns sprout from every alcove, and busts of forbears dressed as Julius Caesar create a suitably occult air of gnostic mystery. However, our own college does boast a small collection of glass cases containing items like strange knives stuck into corks, which quasi-museum is intended presumably, to grow into the complete history of general practice. There is also a case containing souvenir college ties, cuff-links, and so on. For some reason, no T-shirts or mugs.

I notice that my companions are not recovered yet from the written exam, and discuss academic things with hysterical glee. Fortunately for us all, the wait is short, and a college official, apologising that the professor is at an 'Important Meeting', shepherds us upstairs. On the landing, yet another glass case, sporting a Roman skull,



whose occupant died from a trephining operation, stands as a permanent indictment of minor surgery in general practice.

It is an understatement to speak of the two vivas as a grilling — one eventually emerges, two or three days later, well toasted and five pounds lighter. The first half is a discussion upon one's 'log diary' of 50 consecutive cases. Although one is allowed a crib, panic sets in as I try to remember why I made such an odd choice of antibiotic in a toddler with otitis media, or why I sent a 35-year-old, with gynaecomastia, straight off to the surgeons although there were no signs of other pathology. Fortuitously, a letter arrived the day before saying that hormone assays had indicated the presence of an occult tumour, but do they award marks for clairvoyance?

Eventually, a Top Rank gong sounds, breaking the spell, and clutching a piece of paper showing the subjects so far covered, I scurry away to the next pair of interrogators.

This section is intended to help examiners find answers to intractable problems which have already baffled them. They also

baffle me, and I seem to end up sending everything to specialists, which seems, to my surprise, to meet with approval from the inquisitors. All the way through, however, a part of me says: 'Why do you keep rabbit-ing on — you're talking non-sense and they know it.' Is this the voice of conscience, or the initial stages of schizophrenia?

And so at last, it is over. Feeling purged intellectually, I wander back home to await the fateful news and, perhaps, a nice gilded certificate to slip into the envelope with all the other credentials of earthly achievement.

But those who fail — take heart. If you are barred from participating in the academic and research aims of the college, you can build quite a following by running it down, pointing out that our predecessors didn't need a bunch of jumped-up academics to teach them their job. Once upon a time, doctors learned by experience — like the chap who did the trephining back in Roman Britain.

*Jon Garvey is a GP in Chelmsford, Essex.*