

# Meet my practice guardian angel

**In a perfect life, receptionists would not leave to have babies. That apart, Dr Jon Garvey is well satisfied.**

**M**Y IDEAL receptionist would not do what all of ours seem to be doing, which is leaving to have babies. This only goes to show that ideal anythings do not exist, since in the real world, nothing remains the same for long.

Having dispensed with that philosophical diversion, however, I may say that good reception staff are as essential to a practice as Castrol to a motor-car.

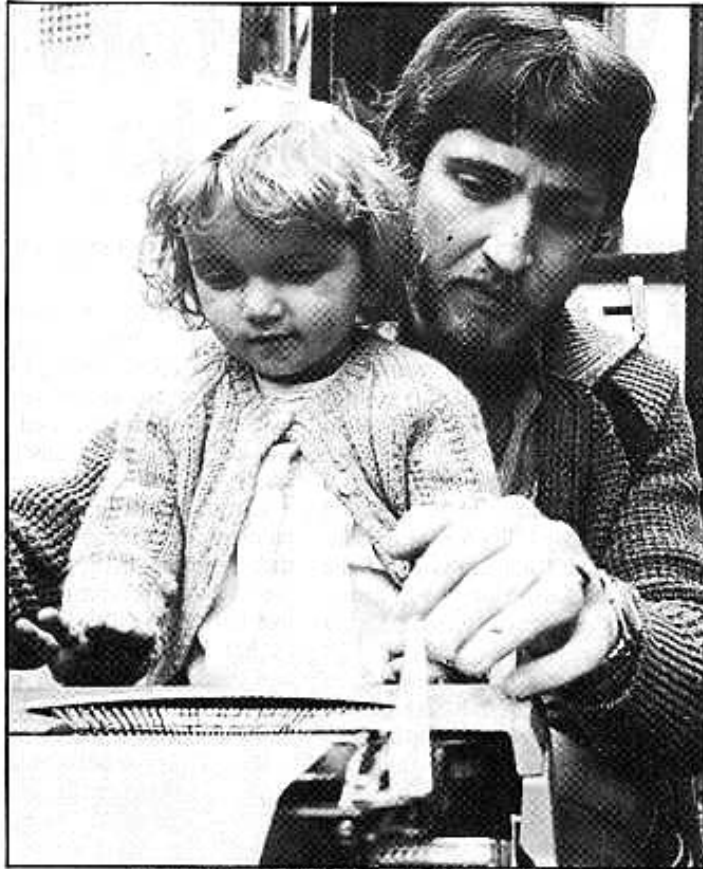
There are supposed to be some egalitarian practices which divvy up the profits equally between all the staff, so that the senior partner gets the same as the girl on the desk, and I can see a lot of merit in that system.

After all, if one compares virtually any aspect of their work with ours, one cannot say that the receptionist wants either skill or application.

Hours? She is at the surgery to unlock before you arrive, and stays to switch on the tinned message on the answering machine long after you've gone home to watch "Coronation Street". She's also there, munching her sarnies and holding the fort, while you're consuming vast quantities of food and Chablis at the expense of Fnitzgumple Laboratories Ltd.

Skill? Our receptionists can spot the patients who will clog up evening surgery for half an hour as they park their cars, and will give them a long appointment even when they claim only to have come for a certificate. And they can tell you with unerring accuracy that Mrs Slagg's notes are not with Mr Slagg's because she's cross-referenced with Mr Conn, who has swopped her for his own spouse.

Hard work? Who has to sit and soak up the verbal artillery from the waiting hordes when you're running late? The patients know



The author teaches his budding receptionist the ropes.

they will not dare abuse the doctor once they get in his door, so it is the minion who gets it in the neck. She also gets it in the neck from the doctor, of course, who alone among the practice staff considers himself entitled to externalise his frustrations, knowing he cannot be sacked.

But as if all this were not enough, the Angels of the Appointment Book will give service above and beyond their already arduous duty.

Recently, I found to my dismay that my woolly soldier had disappeared. You may mock, but it is a serious matter, as I only have three toys in my room, all I could filch from my children without them noticing (Ooh daddy, I've got one like that at home).

After a thorough search of the premises, including the steriliser and the fish tank — did you know you can claim for each new fish you get on an FPI0? — we concluded that some grubby

urchin had taken it during the child development clinic, without his mother realising that he had not brought it with him. He'd pretty soon stop developing if I had my way.

But to my delighted surprise, a week or so later, I found in my in-tray a fully operational, completely equipped, replacement woolly soldier. The girls had, quite on their own initiative, discussed the problem and persuaded one of our nurses to get her mum to run it up on her knitting machine.

To tell the truth, I feel slightly uneasy in the doctor-receptionist relationship. As a product of the classless age, whose only domestic staff are a wife and a contingent of noisy machines which chew up dirt, clothes or food, I am unused to having servants.

Yet here are these fine people, doing my thinking for me, telling me what I'm supposed to be doing and where I'm supposed to

be going, plying me with endless cups of coffee and cream cakes—in a practice our size, it's always *somebody's* birthday—and politely calling me Doctor Garvey even when the patients are not listening.

It is tempting to be seduced by this efficiency into thinking of one's reception staff as nothing but glorified parlourmaids, when in fact they are the hub around which the practice revolves.

Doctors? We are merely pill-peddlars and pen-pushers, putting a rubber-stamp on our patients' self-definitions as 'sick'.

Nurses? Mere domestics, sublimating their maternal instincts.

But receptionists! These are the people at the spearhead of medicine. These are the people who really know the patient, and see the face which is kept hidden from the doctor.

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



**Your poor receptionist munches her sarnies and holds the fort while you consume vast quantities of food and Chablis.**