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## Galluping to glory

I was the victim of an opinion poll today. Well, none of the other partners wanted to do it, and they give some money to charity for your trouble, so I thought it might be a change from doing the *Update* prize quiz. (Interestingly enough, they actually have a list of charities from which to select, accompanied by a list of the percentage of doctors who chose each one last year—polling evidently becomes an ingrained habit.)

This Gallup poll turned out to be about medical periodicals, and after an initial battery of questions about which journals I had read recently, I was acutely aware of being extremely *au fait* with the medical gutter press, and completely out of touch with the sensible journals. Fortunately, though, my pollster quickly passed on to one particular magazine, and to my surprise I was offered a copy of your Favourite Mag, and asked to indicate which articles I had read. Having had my review copy the day before, and perused it from cover to cover in a fit of loyalty, Miss Gallup was a little nonplussed to have to spend 25 minutes blue-pencilling through 120 pages of *World Medicine*.

Presumably, IPC will use these results to decide which parts of the publication to emphasise, and which to drop. So if you find this column transposed to page five in place of the editorial, and edged in gold, you will know that they failed to realise their sample was not quite unbiased.

## Taking the rep

Representatives of pharmaceutical companies have taken quite a lot of stick over the years in private, though not often in print. In view of who foots the bill for most medical publications, the latter is hardly surprising.

Personally, I have always had a pretty good working relationship with reps (I wonder how old Velosef Jeff is getting along, not to mention my old pal Rythmodan Dan), even though the man from Berk, asking our suggestions for useful promotional material, never took up my colleague's inspired idea for loop-paper with "Anusol for Piles" inscribed on every sheet.

What gives reps a bad name is that they are such a variable species. Sometimes, one may be approached by a person with such obvious depth of knowledge of his product that one would suppose he had invented it. Others give

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the impression of having been recently made redundant by a subsidiary of Flybynite Double Glazing Ltd. Recently, for example, one chap was seriously expecting me to accept his assertion that his medicine for bad tummies was as good as the H<sub>2</sub> antagonist, cetrimide.

Most, however, have at least a working knowledge of the stuff they are supposed to be selling, which is more than can be said of most of *us*. If only they didn't have such excruciating ways of putting their point across. It is all one can do, sometimes, to keep a straight face, and I usually end up burying my smirk in *MIMS*, and checking the price. (They nearly all claim that their product works out cheaper than all the others and they are very rarely right—in fact, they're often pretty hazy about how much it *does* cost, but perhaps that is a habit acquired from the double glazing business.)

One common species is the in-tense, sincere type, who sounds as if he would be more at home selling washing powder ("Gargledex is not twice, but THREE TIMES as effective as the next most prescribed brand. And remember, you can prescribe it in the new blister pack at *NO EXTRA COST!*") At least this type is more inspiring than the bloke who has learned all he knows from the promotion pack, and gets completely twitched if you ask him a question about page four while he is still replaying page two. This sort is particularly at home with those firms which have an overstaffed graphics department.

I was subjected to one such promotion a month or so ago, in which a neat little box was opened leaf by leaf by the rep, each leaf posing a tantalising question, and supposedly firing one's curiosity to unbearable intensity before the final page revealed the product name. When this final leaf was turned, behold! A free handkerchief, for the relief, presumably, of the emotions so feverishly aroused. The whole pack was then presented, so that one had to wade through the whole spiel again before one could retrieve the free gift and consign the literature to the filing cabinet beneath the desk. This pack was apparently designed by someone who had been previously involved in experimental psychology with pigeons. I forget what the drug's name was, but it must have had something to do with noses.

Other companies still rely on sex appeal which, in fact, works very well if the rep knows what she is talking about. Otherwise, it is even more irritating than talking to an ignorant male.

Of course, pharmaceuticals are not promoted solely by the individual encounter; a good proportion of the average GP's serum cholesterol comes from the opulent lunches laid on by manufacturers. The drug firms believe

that they are changing our prescribing habits, and we, instead of watching the film, are meeting fellow doctors and reassuring ourselves that we are not the only ones whose practices are driving us to an early grave. Thus everybody is happy. I, however, watch waitresses inadvertently tipping water from the vegetable dish into the lap of an unsuspecting doctor while gracefully serving asparagus to another, and I listen to the conversation about tribal habits in Zambia, and muse that this is a funny way to persuade scientific minds that one compound is more efficacious than another in the management of disease. I still eat the lunch, though.

When all is said and done, as it usually is once a drug rep has you in his clutches, the kind of salesman I like—and the only sort I listen to—is the one who forgets all the pro-motions, ignores the sales patter, and simply by his knowledge and his arguments, convinces me that his company is marketing a better product at a better price than its competitors. Am I really the only one who thinks this way, or are the firms spending 10 times as much as they need to, with their calendars, desk diaries, executive toys and all?

No, no, perish the thought. It would be a dull life indeed without the friendly neighbourhood dope-peddler and his bag of toys!

## The unkindest cut

I can see I will have to be more sensitive to the feelings of Potiphar, my co-columnist. I told him the joke about painless camel castration and he's been completely imhotep ever since.

## Bye-bye everybody

I was conscripted on my son's birthday to accompany him to see the Sooty Show at our local theatre. My job was to find the seats and foot the bill for numerous ice-creams, tartrazine-squashes and overpriced memorabilia of the event. Otherwise, I was somewhat superfluous, which was underlined by the little fellow yelling for mummy at the frightening bits.

I was therefore free to concentrate on the plot, such as it was ("Squeak—squeaksqueaksqueak!" "What was that, Sweep? The telephone doesn't work?"), and observe the action.

Imagine my shock, then, when Sweep presented Sooty with the inevitable bone prior to the latter's imminent departure for Mars by cardboard rocket. For the bone he presented was a human femur!

What are they teaching our dear innocents? Can this man-eating bunch really be the furry little fellows of my childhood tea-times? What would Harry Corbett have thought of this depravity?\*