



Jon Garvey chews the cud

Bumps in the night

It could never be said that general practice lacks variety. Our daily work involves excursions into the fields of sociology, psychology, criminology, public health, public safety, and many more esoteric areas as well as our more straightforward medical activities. This month, I have been presented with a poltergeist case.

Let me outline the background. A young patient of ours, an asthmatic, was found dead in his room, having succumbed to a particularly severe attack during the night. This came as a shock, but not altogether as a surprise, since he was wont to prefer to manage his own attacks with gross overdosage of his inhalants rather than seek help.

The family, who had originally come from Australia, and who had at least two other bad asthmatics among them, decided that they had had enough of England, and started to make arrangements to take their son back to the old country for burial.

Uneasy times

Unfortunately, one of the children was far from happy with this plan, having recently acquired a good job and a fiancé, and had no intention of leaving. Mother, however, was adamant that she should, and the atmosphere in the household, already disturbed by the recent tragedy, became doubly uneasy.

Mother came about her nerves, but soon began to disclose that odd things had been happening in the house. Lights were being mysteriously switched on downstairs when everyone was in bed. Small objects were being moved from their places. A cross had been pulled from the wall. Footsteps were heard on the stairs in the evening. Mother had been to see her local vicar, who suggested that the dead son, being

shorn of life in such an untimely manner, was finding it hard to let go. Because of the atmosphere in the family, they were not properly resolving their grief, and their refusal to accept the death made it harder for the disembodied spirit to depart—hence the bumps in the night.

I am not well up on that august, but dubiously successful body, the Society for Psychical Research, but as I understand it the only conclusion they have reached in over a century is that in cases of poltergeists, there is nearly always a disturbed adolescent around.

A mystery?

There certainly was in this case—a girl with a very abnormal grief reaction, who must have found it very hard to reconcile her sense of loss with her anger against her dead brother for being the cause of her broken engagement and forced repatriation to a land she hardly even remembered.

We are not, of course, in an age of easy acceptance of the paranormal, still less the supernatural. The most obvious explanation of the strange goings on is that somebody, in a disturbed state of mind, has been wandering around in the small hours tampering with the furniture with the aim, conscious or unconscious, of winding up other members of the household. Much less mysterious all round.

Me, I'm fairly sceptical about most things. I've not witnessed any of this family's manifestations, so I don't propose to plump for any particular explanation. It is interesting to me, though, that if one puts up one's rational blinkers in this case, and only considers the last explanation, one is in danger of missing the chance to help the family. After all, the only information one gets from it is that someone in the house is an insomniac—hardly surprising, given the recent bereavement. But neither of the less prosaic explanations will lead one to realise the problem in the household—because of the ambivalence of their emotions, they are unable to say goodbye properly. The teen-age daughter, unless she can sort her feelings out, is going to be haunted by guilt about her resentment of her dead brother for many years, even if

his spirit isn't wandering the earth looking for a resting-place.

And if, indeed, he *is* still hanging around the house, I hope he is able to sort his ideas out soon. I, for one, will certainly not be going to the house to ask him to move on; he never took any notice of my advice even when he was alive.

Bread for slaughter

I wrote last July about a patient of mine, a bakery manager, who had disillusioned me about the wholesomeness of wholemeal bread, by spilling the beans about additives used by most bakeries in its manufacture. Some of you may have seen a reply in the correspondence columns from the director of the National Association of Master Bakers, which said, in effect, that their stuff is OK. If he'd read my article he'd have seen that this was not in dispute. In passing, he suggested that I had been talking about the British Sliced Loaf, which again suggests he didn't read the article. A typical case of not using his loaf.

I know, I know...

Since then, I have had a copy of a briefing paper from the British Nutrition Foundation, saying what good, nutritious food bread is, in case I hadn't realised. But I thought I'd made it clear that I *know* what a good food bread is. I eat huge quantities of the stuff. My only argument is that a lot of what you buy is not bread.

Here is evidence. I have before me the wrapper of a shop-bought "wholemeal" loaf, with a rustic logo and the advice to eat within one day for maximum freshness. To pre-empt the forthcoming legislation, it has a list of ingredients, thus: wholemeal flour, water, yeast, salt, wheat protein, hydrogenated vegetable oil, dried glucose syrup, Emulsifier E472(e), Preservative E280, E281.

I have a feeling that Europe has a glucose-syrup mountain, since it appears in virtually every food product from jam to yoghurt, but why all the other things?

Nobody (he whimpered) could call me a fussy man, I *only* want a little piece of bread. . . ■