



**Jon
Garvey
chews
the cud**

A breath of fresh air

Some police surgeons have been in a gloomy mood about the new drinking and driving regulations. Now that ERM is to be the rule—that's evidential breath monitoring, not expressed breast milk—police surgeons stand to take a substantial drop in their income.

This will be hardest felt by our industrious representatives in the Metropolitan area, for whom taking blood samples from suspects has hitherto been a full-time job, and the only means of keeping the Roller on the road. But out here in the sticks life has a slower pace, and my own secret feeling as the machines take over is one of relief.

I find it very hard to rejoice in the call-out fee when I have been summoned from my bed for the third time in one night to stick needles in some spotty psychopath who couldn't pee when he was asked to. I might take a more philosophical view if the station sergeant gave me cash on the nail, but it all disappears into the practice coffers, never to be seen again.

To add to the suffering, policemen on night-shift have that same nauseating *bonhomie* possessed by nurses who delight in phoning housemen to request nitrazepam, and the same propensity for failing to get the forms ready for you when you arrive.

In short, I find my duties under Section 6 of the Road Traffic Act to be thoroughly irksome. My only reason for performing them is a sense of public duty, and the satisfaction of knowing that each offender who loses his licence is that much less likely to kill one of my family and friends some inebriate night. If the same job can be done by a machine, though I might be somewhat less well off, I shall at least be in bed.

But on the first day of the new legislation, I was called out of

evening surgery for a traditional Section 6 venepuncture session. The station sergeant was apologetic, having waited all day for his first chance to put his extensive training as a breath-testing machine-operator to good use. Unfortunately, the only culprit they could nab was a wizened old septuagenarian alcoholic in the last stages of chronic bronchitis and emphysema. It was all he could do to talk, let alone produce a breath sample big enough for the computer to get its teeth into. So, as the new regulations demand, the faithful police doctor was called to save the day.

I have the feeling that I am seeing the shape of things to come.

...and more glimpses of the future

In fact, the Evidential Breath Monitoring machine arrived at our local police station a week or two in advance of the changes in the law. I turned up to examine some Mohican-haired chap who had absent-mindedly tried to remove his handcuffs without first unlocking them, and noticed that about a third of our small surgeon's room was occupied by a large stove-enamelled object, intermediate in appearance between a greenhouse propagator and a printing machine.

It is surely only a matter of time before my services as a police surgeon are completely superfluous. Come the next generation of artificial intelligence, robots will be able to do anything I can do. A machine could, for example, do a much better job of confirming that half-eaten, bloated bodies floating in the reservoir are indeed dead, and do an EEG to prove it. It wouldn't even mind the smell. A device like that would solve at a stroke the controversy over whether rape victims should be examined by male or female doctors, and who would dare gainsay the expert evidence it gave in court?

If things go the same way as they seem to be over the drinking and driving laws, the Association of Police Surgeons might even be able to negotiate an increase in the retaining fee to compensate for lost earnings from work done by robots, so I should be rich *and* in bed.

Comet, what comet?

Ever since I pored over my copy of *The Boy's Book of Astronomy* it has been my ambition to see a comet. It is true to say that since 1959 I have been waiting for 1986 for Halley's job to come by again, but from what Patrick Moore says now it's likely to be rather dim compared with every other appearance since 1066.

So when they discover a new one, and say it's going to pass closer than any other since seventeen-something-or-other, my social life has to be radically rearranged.

But it's all a con, you know. It's just to whet the appetite of amateurs like me, who have to get our astronomical thrills by squinting through binoculars and saying to ourselves that that's where the Crab Nebula *would* be if we had a decent telescope.

They always announce total eclipses of the sun once they are certain that there will be a constant drizzle for two days on either side. There's no eclipse really, but the astronomers, like the astrological priests of old, know they've got us in their power, so we all go out anyway and gaze hopefully into the leaden skies.

So it is with comets, and so it was that I spent the three halfway clear nights when the latest was allegedly visible, freezing half to death and gazing into the usual old constellations as they twinkled mockingly back at me. It didn't help that the radio had said it would be visible in Leo, while all the patients kept telling me they knew it was in Ursa Major.

They were *all* wrong. It wasn't anywhere. I scanned the heavens with a critical eye, amazing myself by spotting Coma Berenices with my naked eyes and a veritable traffic jam of Soviet spy satellites waiting to drop the Bomb. But not a comet did I see.

It was as I lay on my back in the middle of the lawn contemplating the unfairness of the impassive cosmos that I became aware of a sniffing sound by my left ear, and turned to see a hedgehog trying to determine if I was edible or not.

There must be a lesson there somewhere. ■