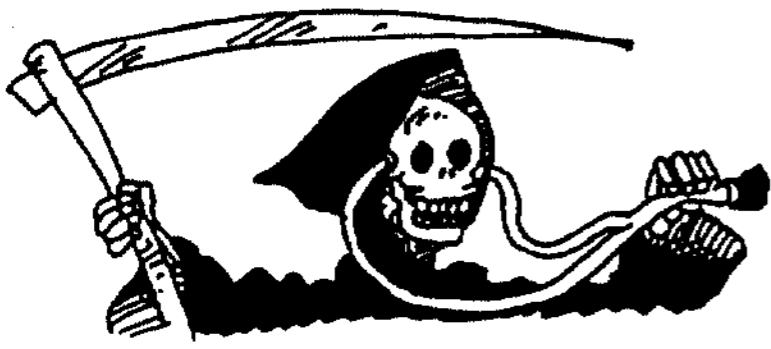


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DOING THE ROUNDS



Focus on Bristol

BACK in May 1992 (*Eye* 793), *Doing the Rounds* exposed the abysmal paediatric cardiac surgery unit at the United Bristol healthcare trust (UBHT). As far back as 1988 the mortality rates were so high that the unit was dubbed "The Killing Fields" and "The Departure Lounge" by those in the know.

Despite a long crisis of morale among the unit's staff, surgeons repeatedly refused to publish their mortality rates in a manner that would allow comparison with other units. John Roylance, the trust chief executive, and senior officials at the department of health were fully aware of the problems, but initially chose to ignore them.

Other consultants working in the trust admitted privately that the unit was a disgrace and that they wouldn't send their children to it — but they continued to send other people's children there "to support the hospital". The word on the paediatric cardiac surgery circuit in 1992 was "everyone knows about Bristol".

A secret audit kept by consultant anaesthetist Dr Stephen Bolsin — which was first published in the *Eye* — was the start of the unit's undoing. Dr Bolsin found that the unit's mortality rate for repairing Fallot's tetralogy, a congenital heart malformation, was between 20 and 30 percent. In Liverpool, 160 babies had similar operations without a single death.

He then found that the mortality rate for arterial switch, an operation to connect congenitally transposed arteries from the heart, was 30 percent in Bristol, compared to 10 percent elsewhere in

Britain and nearly 0 percent in America (*Eye* 797). This figure worsened to 61 percent by 1993, though parents of children who died from these operations were told they had "a 70 to 80 percent chance of success".

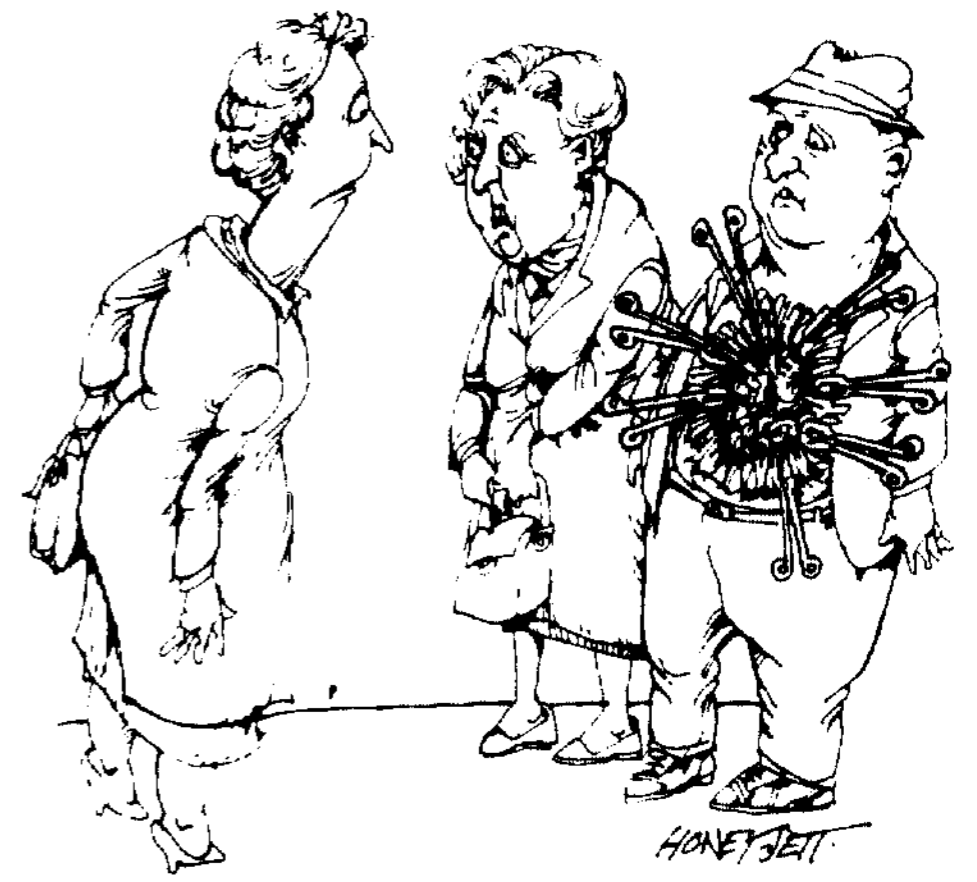
In September 1992 (*Eye* 804), it was revealed that James Wishart, the senior paediatric cardiac surgeon, had been appointed chairman of the hospital management committee and medical adviser to the trust board. For whatever reason, he did not alert them to the disastrous death rates of his unit. Overall, a baby was twice as likely to die from open heart surgery in his unit than any other in the country.

Dr Bolson first confronted his trust superiors with his findings in 1993, though they were already well aware of them. He received little support and eventually took his findings to Dr Peter Dole at the department of health. In October 1993, 18 months after the *Eye*'s leak, neonatal switch operations were cancelled at the hospital. However, in January 1995, a switch operation was performed on an 18-month-old child who died the next day. The DoH then banned the unit from doing all operations.

A surgical unit can have bad mortality figures for a number of reasons. Sometimes it is because they select particularly difficult cases. Sometimes it is because of a lack of specialist staff and equipment. And sometimes it is because some of the surgeons are slow, dangerous, cumbersome and too arrogant to acknowledge their own limitations, even when babies are dying around them.

Which or whom is to blame in this case is unclear. The trust has refused to release a damning report by independent investigators or to divulge its statistics since the problem was first highlighted in 1988. The fact that it took the department of health seven years to suspend all operations at the unit is a disgrace, and the trust, the government, the NHS and the taxpayer now look likely to face huge compensation claims from the distressed parents of up to 100 children who may have died as a result of the incompetence and self-protective instincts of senior doctors and managers at UBHT.

Some parents wrote to the *Eye* after the initial disclosures and were strongly advised to demand that their children be referred to units in Oxford or Southampton. However, many remained in the dark



"They were halfway through the operation when the money ran out"

until the *Daily Telegraph* and *BBC West* (whom MD tipped off in 1992) finally caught up with the story in January. Most were furious that they had not been told of the ban by the trust, but as the press officer explained pitifully: "We really wanted to do this right, and we fully intended to ring them before they found out somewhere else. But we couldn't have called them too early because one of them might have leaked it to the press."

Were it not for the courageous whistleblowing of Dr Stephen Bolson, the death toll would have been even higher. **M.D.**

Ward Closure Improves Hospital Care for Elderly Patients

Health News Weekly (Salisbury)

DOWN ON THE FARM

IN A forlorn attempt to "generate vote winning ideas on agriculture" for the next general election, Droopy "Willie" Waldegrave, the subsidies minister, has set up a "policy group" to write the agriculture component of the next Conservative party manifesto.

Waldegrave has told this strictly "political" group it should "focus on ideas that will give advantage to the Conservative party", suggesting that they should develop ideas on, among other things, the common agricultural policy, animal welfare and "reclaiming the rural vote".

Notices of meetings have been sent to a number of well-known agriculture experts, not least Archie Norman, chief executive of the Asda supermarket group, who should know all there is to know about winning rural votes; and to that great supporter of the rural economy Edward Robinson, chief executive of Booker Agribusiness.

In his haste to spread the word, however, Droopy

— or his egregious special adviser David Rutley — seems to have forgotten an important point of protocol: ministers acting on party political matters should not avail themselves of the resources of the ministries they head. Perhaps it was indeed an oversight that the meeting notifications were sent out on the Maffia's headed paper and at least one meeting has been held in conference room "A" of the ministry's headquarters in Whitehall Place.



ONE surprise member of Droopy's group is Sir Jerry Wiggin, currently chairman of the Commons select committee on agriculture. It remains to be seen how a policy adviser to the minister can reconcile this position with acting as a supposed independent backbench "watchdog" on the activities of ministers.

To judge from Wiggin's recent performance on his committee — considering the licensing of veterinary medicines — he might just as well join the government team and be done with it. Campaigners who are looking to Wiggin to blow the lid off the ever growing disaster of organophosphorus pesticides — which are poisoning farmers in their hundreds — are likely to be disappointed.

Convening a meeting to examine the head of the

government organisation which approved these chemicals — the veterinary medicines directorate — Wiggin was at great pains to tell the assembly how much he had enjoyed the hospitality of the VMD the day before the meeting.



HUMPHREY Errington, maker of Lanark Blue cheese (*Eyes passim*), won an important victory last week which brings him one step nearer to saving his business and ensuring the continued availability of the marque.

In February, after environmental health officers from Clydesdale district council had seized the last remaining stocks of this famous cheese, justice of the peace Elizabeth Wilson was asked to condemn the cheese "contaminated" with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

To determine the fate of the cheese, Wilson took scientific evidence from experts nominated by Clydesdale council but would not allow cross-examination by Errington's QC, Mr Michael Jones. When she condemned the cheese, without giving a reason, Errington appealed to the Edinburgh court of sessions, arguing that the decision "breached the rules of natural justice".

Wilson claimed she had not allowed cross-examination because of the urgency of the case but, after a two-day hearing, concluded on 24 April. Lord Justice Weir agreed that Wilson had acted contrary to natural justice. He ruled that the fitness of the cheese was not a matter of urgency but "of scientific investigation" for which expert evidence should have been tested. Lord Weir also criticised Clydesdale district council for opposing cross-examination.

This all means that the original case must be heard again when Mr Errington will finally know whether he can keep his cheese or not. It would be "highly desirable" to have the case heard by an experienced sheriff rather than an "inexperienced and unassisted lay person", Lord Weir has ruled. The big question is why an "inexperienced and unassisted lay person" was asked to hear the case in the first place.

'New Muckspreader

Old Macdonald

ALBERT

