THE PLEASURES OF PROFESSIONAL LIFE

By Sir Clive Fitts

Delivered at a meeting of the Medico-Legal Society held on 3rd August, 1974 at 8.30 p.m., at the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Spring Street, Melbourne. The Chairman of the meeting was the Medical Vice-President, Dr. Ainslie Meares.

An address with this title is clearly a period piece, for it implies a retrospect of many years of professional life and whatever pleasures wait in the future they are not likely to be such as I and my contemporaries have known.

"All the glory I claim in this world is that I have lived quietly" said Montaigne. In my impressionable years it was my fortune to work with wonderful people, here, in England and in the United States who believed in reticence and were content with obscurity.

Brought up in that tradition, in my small world my pleasures have been largely in a minor key and my tale this evening is anecdotal and perhaps to some of you it may be repetitive.

Why on the impulse of a moment did I use the term professional life rather than physician's life? Perhaps because I cannot separate the practice of my profession from my life as a whole. Certainly it was not because I claim to speak for the pleasures of the practice of the law. Yet I think there is some common bond which someone might reveal in defining what is implicit in the word, profession.

Legal members will agree with me that we have certain terms in common. The word case comes to mind. In my student days it was common for a friend to whisper "There is a case of pneumonia up in Ward 20". Up one would go before the word went round to see a patient with a hectic flush on one cheek, reminiscent to the imaginative of the top layer of a case of Jonathans.

I know that the legal use of the term is much more precise, and I cherish the dictum of Judge Arabin who is recorded as saying that "if ever there was a case of clearer evidence than this of persons acting in concert together this case is that case".

This statement by the Judge comes under the heading of the judicial homily. It has been described as a difficult art in which a false note can be fatal to dignity and an embarrassing oc-

casion in a waiting court. Quite recently one of H.M. Judges in England delivered a homily to a man convicted of manslaughter. "The succession of bullets which you fired into your stepfather" he said, "indicates to me that this is a case of some gravity."

The law does not have the homily to itself. We physicians are able to deliver it at greater length *in camera.*

When I come to the use of the word judgment I hesitate to make comparisons. I came by chance on a saying of Sir Edward Coke that the law is the perfection of reason, and I do not think our legal members would dissent from that. I have not been able to verify this reference but in 1607 King James called the judges together and told them that he had the authority to take what causes he pleased from them as they were only his delegates.

Coke with the unanimous support of his colleagues told him that it was not law. "Then the king said that he thought the law was founded upon reason and that he and others had reason as well as the judges. To which it was answered by me, that true it was that God had endowed his Majesty with excellent science and great endowments of nature, but his Majesty was not learned in the laws of his realm of England, and causes which concern the life or inheritance or goods or fortune of his subjects, they are not to be decided by natural reason, but by the artificial reason and judgment of the law."

I think the members of my profession will be relieved to know that in the law judgment is based on artificial reason, for in medicine I can only define judgment as the art of making the right guess on insufficient evidence.

The only common ground I can find with the Law is in the Workers' Compensation Board where it seems that judgment is the art of making the right guess on a superfluity of evidence.

Indeed after bestriding the narrow witness box like a pigmy in that Court I have come away with the feeling that it is dangerous to be alive and the only solution is for our benevolent Government to put us all on Compensation from the day of birth.

Despite all the warnings, like King James I am at times tempted to trespass into the domain of the law. It is unlikely that I shall ever have this opportunity again of addressing a silent legal audience and so I shall grasp it.

A short time ago I was asked for an opinion about a claim for compensation brought by a widow on the grounds that her husband's two employments had aggravated and accelerated hy-

pertensive cardio-vascular disease and coronary occlusion and myocardial infarction.

In a country town this man was employed as a clerk by day, and at night he played the piano for the guests at the Farmers Arms Hotel. At 9.20 p.m. on a Saturday night he collapsed and died at the piano.

His daytime employer when told of the claim was outraged and said the whole thing was bloody ridiculous and that Wal would turn in his grave if he knew. The widow he described as an absolute bitch and he made it quite clear that the only peace Wal knew was while working as a clerk or playing the piano at the Farmer's Arms.

Borrowing some of King James reason I advised that the claim should be denied. It seemed to me that the worker at least found compensation for he had died in harmony in the Farmer's Arms rather than in discord in the arms of his wife.

I wish now to tell you three anecdotes that I think illustrate the pleasures of professional life.

At an early stage of my professional life I was engaged with the problems of pulmonary tuberculosis at the Brompton Hospital, in Switzerland and in Norfolk. Despite specialized knowledge the essence of the physician's responsibility was caring for people with a chronic disease the outcome of which could be uncertain even after months. In the remote world of the Swiss Alps and in Norfolk one lived with these people visited them in their rooms twice and sometimes thrice daily, and with those who were well enough we dined.

Not only was this experience a challenge to the physician, but what one did not realize at the time was the subtle and profound influence of these people on the physician.

As one sat by the bed inevitably there developed a curiosity, that lust of the mind as John Donne called it, about the patient's life and interests that led to talk and discussion that had nothing to do with tuberculosis but much to do with my education.

On that bank and shoal time did not seem to matter, and I have come to regard the illusion of timelessness as essential to the pleasures of professional life.

When I returned to Melbourne tuberculosis was still a common disease and I found myself caring for a young nurse on the staff of Epworth Hospital. She was a serene and beautiful young woman who had won a singing scholarship but chose to nurse.

Her parents were in what was known as reduced circumstances, and some think the term is acquiring fresh life.

In the spring of that year she had on her bed table in Richmond a small bunch of flowers in a milk bottle. Time passed, they faded and died and I wondered when they would vanish. They had gone when I called on Christmas morning and I received a gift—a watercolour drawing of the flowers framed by her father. The flowers had come to life.

I was so impressed that I took the drawing to the National Gallery to show Daryl Lindsay. In his inimitable way he was excited by the story and then visited my patient. He advised her to draw single specimens of Australian wild flowers and whenever either of us went into the country we would find wild flowers for her.

Before she had fully recovered we arranged a show at George's Gallery and this virtually sold out within an hour. A second show in Sydney was not such a success but an uncle whom my patient had never met went to see her work. Not long after, he died and left her £1,000.

Her health restored we discussed the question of increasing her knowledge of botany and Professor Turner was very helpful to her.

Then in 1951 she ventured into the unknown, went to London and took a room in a house almost at the gate of Kew Gardens. She introduced herself and said that her wish was to study the anatomy of plants at Kew, and gradually she was accepted. The house where she took a room is now her own.

In February this year following a successful exhibition of her drawings at Colnaghi's from which her work was acquired by the Victoria and Albert and the British Museums, The *Sunday Telegraph* described her as one of the finest and most exacting botanical artists in the world.

I wish I had time to tell you of the late Lord Talbot de Malahide who succeeded to the estate of Malahide in Tasmania and of his plan to record the endemic flora of Tasmania and of how he came to know Margaret Stones who has done all the drawings for the four volumes so far published.

"The superbly drawn colour plates by Margaret Stones in all their brilliant detail and the concisely authoritative botanical descriptions by Dr Winifred Curtis will be a permanent delight to all who live or work with plants and those who enjoy the beauty of fine craftsmanship."

There was a time in my professional life when I faced the tyranny of total immersion in the literature of one subject. I was in the habit of reading medical journals at lunch-time and one day in revolt I went for a stroll.

Ten minutes from my rooms I found in a side street a small bookshop hitherto unknown to me. It has vanished together with the book-lover who owned it, and to whom I pay my tribute for what he did to broaden the education of those who frequented his shop. I spent many a lunch hour there, and often came away with a book on loan which he thought I should read. One day he handed me a faded copy of The Autobiography of Benjamin Robert Haydon and asked me to read it.

Haydon was an artist, and generally speaking a bad one, though I have seen his work hung in the Tate Gallery. Aldous Huxley described him as a born writer who wasted his life making absurd pictures when he might have been making excellent books. But tragic though his life was, had it been different he could not have written anything so moving or revealing as the autobiography. To a doctor the story has its own special interest as cogent today as in Haydon's day. It is the story of the young man of promise taken up by those who speculate in talent and mistake it for genius. Haydon knew success or the foretaste of it, for in his brief glory the aristocracy and fashionable society came to his studio, and he dined in their homes. He stayed at Petworth and other great houses painting huge pictures for his patrons. His book gives a superb picture of the social and artistic world of the first half of the nineteenth century. Perhaps his happiest times were spent in the company of Keats and their mutual friends. Both Keats and Wordsworth wrote sonnets to him. I doubt if Sir Walter Scott ever met Haydon but there are several references in Scott's Journal to requests for a loan which once at least Scott gave. We owe to Haydon the presence of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum.

Long before Whistler, he had perfected the gentle art of making enemies. Of the classical pictures of Benjamin West, the President of the Royal Academy, he said "The Venuses look as though they had never been naked before". Of portrait painting, which he disliked, he said "Portraiture is always independent of art and has little or nothing to do with it. It is one of the staple manufactures of the Empire. Wherever the British settle wherever they colonize, they carry and will ever carry trial by jury, horse-racing and portrait-painting".

The truth of this prophecy came to my mind one Sunday when I was doing a round of my ward at the Royal Melbourne Hospital with the student-elite of the final year both men and women. Over the head of each bed is a card bearing the patient's name, the street and suburb he lived in, his marital state and his religion. That morning I was surprised to see that a young man had been given the names David Garrick. I said to the student next to me "That's curious" but he did not respond. "Who was David Garrick?" I asked and he shook his head. A woman student said it was the name of a film star but her friend corrected her and said "That was John Garrick". Another student said it was the name of a brand of cigarettes, and the last comment was on the Garrick theatre in Melbourne.

I turned then to the patient and asked if he knew why his parents had called him David Garrick. "Yes", he said, "I was born on a Saturday night, and my father went to the races in the afternoon and won a packet on a horse called David Garrick."

Possessed by an unwavering belief in his own genius, handicapped from childhood by poor eyesight, Haydon was intolerant, exuberant and improvident. Bankrupt, he took his own life one morning in his studio and by his unfinished canvas he scribbled a paraphrase from Lear "Stretch me longer upon this rough world".

Years passed when one Saturday morning an elderly woman came to see me with a letter from her doctor in Tasmania. In the course of conversation she said that she had had a strenuous fortnight putting in order the contents of an old house that had been willed to her and another woman. Nothing in the house had ever been destroyed. The cheque butts dating dack to the 1830s had come to Australia with the original owner. There were, she said, a great many books in the house and many first editions.

I asked if I might look at the books and I was invited to come that week-end as the books were to be taken for auction on the Monday morning. I hurried back from the country that Sunday evening and set off for the house.

It was a true winter's night. There were gales at sea and the wind and the rain lashed at everything on land. It was more than a winter's night, it was an early Victorian winter's night, for the street lights had failed, and I had difficulty in finding the house. There was no mistaking the place once I came to it, Sherlock Holmes and Watson went to many such homes on wet wintry

nights. The house was set back from the road and the large garden stretched away to the left.

In the black darkness the wind sounded like a torrent among the trees. Though I could not see them, even Watson would have known that the trees were cedars and laurels and the shrubs were briars and laburnums. A long way off at the end of a narrow path a light glimmered through the coloured lead lights. I pulled the bell handle and heard the toll in the distance. My acquaintance let me in, and as she closed the door she shut out the world of today.

A dim flame flickered in the gas jet in the hall. There was no electricity in the house and indeed it would have seemed improper if there had been. We walked down a long dark passage and turned left into a room where the fellow legatee was sitting beside the black marble fireplace.

In my childhood we were allowed to read bound volumes of George Du Maurier's Society Drawings from Victorian Punch. I knew this room. It was the Du Maurier world and I was at home. It was a large room with a vast Victorian sideboard and an overmantel stretching towards the lofty ceiling. There were bookshelves, cupboards and a grand piano. The books were in bundles ready for departure. The massive dining room table was covered with china, glass and bric-a-brac.

I sat by the fire in the master's easy chair. The women asked me to take refreshment and offered me whisky or Brown's Blend, a port which had always been drunk in that house. I chose the port. There was a warm silence in the room and no sound of the turmoil in the world outside.

Away from the bright light of the fire I saw a portrait on the wall and was told that it was of Mr Twentyman the original owner of the house. The artist they said, was a man of genius named Haydon. In Haydon's Autobiography and Journals are frequent references to Bennoch and Twentyman, London merchants who were his friends and who stood by him throughout his troubled life.

I stood up to take my first view of the artist's work and realized that his comment about portraiture having little or nothing to do with art in this instance was true. I said that I knew something of Haydon, whereupon they asked if I knew the value of the paintings, for all the paintings in the room were by him. I told them I knew Haydon's valuations when he died but that I was much more interested in the man himself. A glance

passed between them then one opened a cupboard and brought me Haydon's Autobiography and Journals in the 1853 Edition, and a small leather satchel which they unlocked. It contained letters written by Haydon to Bennoch and Twentyman. The letters were lent to me. They were entertaining and revealing, and the margins were often sketched upon to illustrate the letters in a humorous way.

On the wall behind me were two paintings—a rear view of Napoleon musing after Waterloo, and the other of Wellington also musing.

The letters were sold to America and I have recently been in correspondence with Professor Willard Pope of Vermont who has them. Professor Pope has edited the Diary of Haydon in 5 volumes and I have recently read the correspondence between Haydon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning which he edited.

Of finding two vast canvases of Haydon dust-laden in the Exhibition Building for the President of Magdalen who was writing the volume of the Oxford History of English Art 1800-1820 and who came there with me, and of finding again Napoleon and Wellington this year I have no time to tell.

Chapter 2 of David Copperfield is headed:

"I observe" and in it Dickens discusses not only observation but memory and he implies that some people preserve throughout life a naïve sense of wonder that gives a perennial freshness to passing events and simple associations. These they store in what we call memory and then by means of the three Rs—Recognition, Recall and Recollection they come to life again.

One morning a few years ago the Sister in my consulting rooms said, not without grim satisfaction, "You are wanted by the police". Somewhat disturbed I went to the telephone:

"Constable Gascoyne speaking, doctor" said the voice.

"I wonder do you remember seeing a Mr. Smith of East Kew?"

"When did I see him?" I asked. But the constable did not know. I asked for Mr. Smith's initials and why it was he was calling me. The constable told me that he had searched unsuccessfully for this man's will, and as a last resort a general practitioner had suggested that I might be able to help. The doctor and I had rarely met.

It happened that my secretary was away and when we had a moment that day Sister or I would search for the records of Mr Smith back to the beginning of my time in practice.

Long before we had completed our search, I recalled some-

thing, and I telephoned the constable to ask if Mr Smith had been an old man who collected gramophone records. "Doctor", he replied, "He collected everything. The house was full of nuts and bolts. He was a tip-scrounger and was found dead on the local rubbish tip with £900 in his pockets".

As the day wore on, recognition, recall, and recollection played their part, and though I did not find the medical records that day, we solved the mystery by what Dickens called a slight set of impressions.

When I telephoned to ask about the gramophone records, it was because I had a mental image of an old man sitting opposite to me in my consulting room. It seemed to be late in the day because the light was fading from the sky, and I judged it to be a winter evening. The old man was in his working clothes, and I recalled that he was a fitter and the name of the engineering shop where he was employed. As we sat there after my examination he told me that he had lived alone since his wife had died some years before. I asked him what he would cook for his dinner and what he would do afterwards. He said that he collected gramophone records and told me of his favorite music and invited me to visit him. I asked if he had many visitors and he replied with some bitterness that his two closest relatives had neglected him. For this reason he had an eccentric scheme to dispose of his property so that they should not inherit it. I told him of better things that he might do and advised him to consult a solicitor. He said that he did not know one.

The following morning, I recalled, was cold and windy, because I saw myself rounding the corner from Collins to Spring Street and felt the blast of wind and this confirmed my impression that it was winter. As I did so, I came face to face with a young solicitor holding his hat on, and known to me since his student days when I was resident tutor in Trinity College. I thought it possible that I may have written to Mr Smith that morning and given the solicitor's name.

I pieced together these fragments of memory throughout that day and I had many conversations with the constable. The relatives were seeking letters of administration but because of what the neighbours had told him the constable had been fighting a delaying action and so far had refused to hand over the keys of the house.

Once again I telephoned Constable Gascoyne and suggested that he should speak to the solicitor whose name I gave him.

"Oh", he said, "I don't think that will do any good, Doctor, I advertised for the will repeatedly."

Late in the afternoon, the constable telephoned again. "Doctor, you were right", he said. "We have found the will, and you are the sole executor."

The day was far spent when Constable Gascoyne telephoned for the last time. What were my wishes about 30 budgerigars and 6 pigeons?

The following Saturday morning I went to the house alone. If you wonder why one house in a well kept street in a good suburb looks neglected, the garden choked with weeds, the blinds torn, and the front windows perpetually closed, here is one of the answers.

I unlocked the door and entered. I saw the gramophone records in dusty heaps. There were two gramophones, five wireless sets and two television sets. The house was cold and comfortless and must have long been so. I gave some of the contents to the neighbours who had been kind to Mr. Smith and then sold the house. The knock at the door of my memory enriched the Cardiac Fund at the Royal Melbourne Hospital that I began with a gift from my father by more than £4,000.

We found the old man's notes a few days later. He had been the last patient for the day on a July afternoon five years before in that timeless atmosphere of professional life.

I told a psychiatrist friend this story and he consoled me with the knowledge that this power of recall was commonplace in people of average intelligence who lacked creative imagination and the capacity for abstract thought.

Dante in his great allegory had a vision of the life and destiny of man, and saw it as the Inferno, the Purgatorio and the Earthly Paradise. He said that he had used the word comedy because he thought of life as prosperous, pleasant and desirable.

Death, the inevitable did not destroy the Divine Comedy and I think Mr. Smith, if he inhabits the Heavenly Paradise, might agree with me that behind him he left something prosperous, pleasant and desirable.

A hundred years ago Dr John Brown who wrote Rab and His Friends wrote an essay on Dr Thomas Sydenham, a great English physician of the 17th century sometimes still remembered for his description of St Vitas Dance or Sydenham's Chorea. Brown wrote that to Sydenham human life was a sacred, a divine as well as a curious thing, and that he seemed to have possessed

throughout life in rare acuteness that sense of the value of what was at stake, of the perilous material he had to work in.

Does not this at least in part define professional life? I sense in it at times something I hear in the plainsong deep to the descant of a great music. Something simple and reticent in its quietude, that is desirable, prosperous, and pleasant.

SIR GEOFFREY NEWMAN MORRIS: It seems to me, in listening to him, there is a question we should ask him.

He talked in a way that fascinated all of us about the pleasures of professional life. I think what he really talked about were the pleasures of his own professional life and the very interesting challenges that came to him because of his responsibility.

It occurred to me while he was talking to wonder whether, in fact, the real pleasures of professional life were not related to the responsibilities that we, in our two professions, were prepared to undertake and whether the real reward of the professional life, as contrasted to the responsibilities of those people not in the learned professions, did not come from the responsibilities that we were prepared to accept in our professional life with regard to the handling of persons: that we were prepared to accept the responsibility of helping people in the community rather than—and I am sure this is right, in spite of what the leading articles in *The Age* say—that we were prepared to accept the responsibilities in our professional life of helping other people as opposed to those people, if you like, who work in the blue collar rather than the white collar spheres.

I feel that the fact that we have been able to spend the greater part of our professional lives in our two professions in helping people must have produced really the greatest sense of satisfaction in our lives and must have really been the source of the greatest pleasure in our professional lives. I would be very happy if Sir Clive could comment on this aspect.

SIR CLIVE FITTS: I did not expect to have to do anything more! Obviously I selected three anecdotes, if you like, from what have been countless experiences that delight me in what I call the timeless atmosphere. I believe it is terribly important in the professional life of a physician to create the illusion of timelessness so that the individual has time to spread himself, if you like. To me one of the pleasures of medicine is sitting opposite to a stranger. I call this pleasure but it is part of the task of the service. This is a subject on which I could go on. I could expand upon it endlessly. I think one of the important things

about sitting down opposite to a patient, before you can either write out a prescription or a request for an investigation, is a critical attitude of mind that only comes from allowing the individual to express himself in what seems to him a timeless atmosphere so that you know what sort of person you are dealing with before you start embarking on a course for him which may end in disaster because you have failed to realize he is the wrong sort of person to have a particular operation for a chronic disease or something of that sort. The subject is so bound up with many aspects of professional life.

I gave these three anecdotes only to perhaps provoke thought in other people of similar experiences they have had which are really just a sideline of what is, I think, an unending exhilaration in the daily life of the professional man who deals with strangers.