

**Brian Wood** read the report of the debate on problem-based learning in the last issue with interest. He ponders on the appropriateness of modern teaching methods.

I note with interest the report of a debate on the appropriateness of newer methods for training the next generation of medical doctors. A couple of years ago I was referred to a shoulder surgeon for assessment. Happily, he eventually decided that I was enjoying life too much to be subjected to surgery at that time. He picked up that I am a microbiologist and began a discussion of the part bacteria play in rejection of joint replacements, with particular reference to *Propionibacterium acnes*. This was obviously enjoyed by the two students with him.

Later, I had a second appointment with him, and this time he was accompanied by a whole batch of students, maybe ten or so. I made a comment about *Propionibacterium* being the cause of the holes in certain cheeses, and this led on somehow to a discussion of the distribution of bacteria and other microbes in various parts of the human body. The students were enraptured; the exchanges went on for about a half hour and must have created chaos for the group's schedule in Glasgow Royal Infirmary. I also wonder what waiting patients made of the amount of laughter that was generated. Eventually the surgeon and I realized that we simply had to call this to a close, and the students gave me an impromptu heartfelt vote of thanks.

I particularly recall one boy who was so enthralled that he stopped by to offer further thanks. These were obviously not first-year students, and clearly had no knowledge whatsoever of the microbial world. When I asked the surgeon about it, he confirmed that they no longer received that sort of basic training. He added that he was required to teach them about the problems of the most complex joint in the human body, when they had no firm grounding in skeletal or muscular anatomy.

I had so enjoyed the exchanges with the students (as did they, to my judgment) that I asked if I could give the students a more developed seminar, but they were not with his group for long enough for that to be possible. However, I was invited to give a talk to one of his clinical group meetings on the subject of our microbial partners, a semi-popular one that I call *We are all ecosystems*. It seemed to be well received, but sadly the surgeon died soon afterwards, in a terrible loss to medicine, so I was not able to take this matter any further.

I am emphatically not a clinical microbiologist; brewing, fermented foods and certain environmental issues are my preferred fields, but I am gravely worried that students could advance that far along their training without any direct exposure to microbiology. Microbial infections are surely still an

everyday part of medical experience? My limited knowledge of the disciplines relating to their chosen profession was sufficient for me to hold those students' attention and excite them with the possibilities of the microbial world. I found myself wishing that I was not retired, as I felt that the student who was so utterly enthralled at what I had to say would have welcomed the opportunity to work for a time in a microbiological area, but I had no capacity to offer him anything.

I do understand that the 'didactic' education of my student years is no longer considered acceptable; we must not run the risk of boring the students, or of suggesting that we know better than they what they should be studying. I wonder what would happen if some university had the courage to return to the structured courses of four or five decades ago, and made it absolutely clear that they would only accept students who would work in that disciplined atmosphere? Of course they would need to return to proper pass marks for sessional examinations; no 40% 'pass' mark with 'compensation' for some marks at 35%. Surely there are still some potential students with aspirations high enough to accept those conditions? I am certain that there are employers longing to employ the successful survivors of such a system. Could it be that, after a time, there would be a real demand for places in such a draconian institution from discerning students with real ambitions?

I find it ironic that the fictional Hogwarts School is presented as offering a curriculum more crowded and pressured than any real school would ever dare to use, but children and adults avidly consume Harry Potter's adventures there.



# Training medical personnel

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