

Milestones Three (May – Nov 2006)

Dr Keith D. Thomson
Consultant
Anaesthetist
North Hampshire
Hospital
Basingstoke

Introduction

Eighteen months after surgery and radiotherapy for carcinoma of the tongue I am feeling almost back to normal. I have regained the travel bug, energy levels have returned and I am even enjoying working for the NHS particularly in my specialist field of obstetric anaesthesia.

The legacy of radiotherapy is lack of taste, a burning sensation in response to any food containing strong spices (curry powder, chilli or pepper) and a dry mouth from a continuing absence of saliva particularly at night. The latter state is helped by taking regular sips of water and a saliva replacement gel called 'Biotene'. I must accept that my gourmet days are over but more distressing is that I am unable to appreciate a good wine. In fact to be able to drink alcohol at all it has to be mixed at least fifty-fifty with water as otherwise it stings like crazy. I can even tell how watered down the communion wine in church is.

I no longer attend the local Paul Bevan hospice in Ascot which has provided fantastic support. My mind-set now seems to be that I 'had' cancer rather than 'have' the disease.

I am writing this in a comfortable fully reclining club class seat with built in back massager on a *Qantas* flight to Australia. When you have delayed the 'grim reaper' for the foreseeable future why not splash out a bit – you can't take it with you – the 'SKI' principle (Spend the Kids Inheritance) is quite fun!

This article documents my activities from May-November 2006 both in and out of the North Hampshire Hospital. I now fulfil all my pre-illness NHS contract except for night calls, for dropping which I have had to take a 5% pay cut. But as my knowledge of intensive care is out of date and I still live in Ascot, 28 miles away, this has been a sensible decision.

May

The highlight of this month was a trip with my wife to the *Anastasis* in Liberia. To return to work on the 'ship' which has been so much part of my life over the past 15 years was a major landmark in my recovery. I was able to cope with the heat and the mosquitos, indeed I relished the opportunity to once more have the privilege of serving some of the poorest people in the World. Soon after my return another anaesthetist from the ship, Dr Gehad from Kent, was badly injured in a car crash in Germany. Life is so unpredictable.

I was asked to lecture in Shrewsbury to a group of doctors and Rotarians about experiences in West Africa at a fund raising dinner for *Mercy Ships*. While taking a pre-dinner stroll with two GP friends, I was interested to hear that they both genuinely felt that they are now overpaid for what they do.

Back at work I had a patient who fainted soon after insertion of a spinal for a Caesarean. The dilemma was then whether to intubate or not? Atropine, oxygen and masterly inactivity seemed to work and she soon woke up. The problem was I had done the spinal in the anaesthetic room and had not yet re-attached the monitors in the operating theatre. I was at that time preparing a presentation on 'Feeding in Labour' a literature search had indicated that labour and opiates are the risk factors for delayed gastric emptying not pregnancy *per se*.

I received a 'thank you' note from a 34-year-old primagravida who had recently had an uneventful vaginal delivery. I had seen her three months before in my obstetric anaesthesia assessment clinic (OAAC) to discuss the possibility of regional anaesthesia. She was a fit athletic asymptomatic woman but had had a spina bifida defect closed as a neonate. The report of an urgent MRI scan was 'Spinal

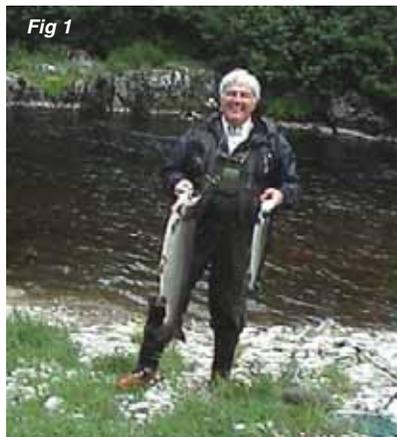
dysraphism with a diostymatle myelia and two low tethered cords extending to the level of L5. Thickened filum terminale. Hydromyelia or dilated central canal at L2/3.

I was unsure exactly what that meant other than no needles should be inserted in her back and her letter should be immediately put in my appraisal folder!

June

I went to the Paul Bevan hospice 'back to work' group for the last time as a patient. It seemed that I now wanted to deny being a cancer patient but this is probably a normal reaction when one's health is improving.

Off to the River Avon, a tributary of the Spey in Scotland, for the annual fishing trip. I made up for lost time last year and caught two sea trout in the first 15 minutes. I eventually finished the week as top rod of ten with eight sea trout and an 8lb salmon. I had even gained enough confidence to fish at night in the dark on my own. The highlight though was landing my friend Don's first Atlantic salmon (fig 1) after videoing the fight.



But I must have become overtired as on returning home I was positive that I had a recurrence of tumour on my tongue. My surgeon was on holiday so I suffered a week punctuated by insomnia and anxiety before he was able to reassure me that it was

just fibrosis. In fact he even 'kindly' chastised me for not contacting him on his mobile.

July

Another three days fishing, this time on the Border Esk at Langholm but with less success – only one sea trout caught on the first morning (fig 2).



Then I went to Bisley to shoot in the Imperial meeting (fig 3). I scored 48/50 in the 'Veterans' and then my best ever score in the first stage of the 'Queen's prize' – 103/105 with 11 'v' bulls. Even with that score I was only 118 out of 300 who qualified to shoot in the second stage. Unfortunately Portugal with my wife



Fig 3. Keeping an eye on the target at Bisley

and friends beckoned and so I just had to rest on my first stage laurels! Both our children had a successful month: our daughter graduated with an upper second in geography at Kings College London and our son with his team of five other Bristol University students broke the world record for the 'Freestyle 48 Challenge' in the USA by more than six days. This involved a member of the team climbing the highest mountain in every state except Alaska and Hawaii and driving two large vehicles nearly 14,000 miles in 23 days 19 hr 31 min.

Sadly my old friend and a former Wexham Park anaesthetic colleague Dick (Richard) Jack died in chronic heart failure. Ten years ago Dick introduced me to the fun of visiting the Baltic States with a team of lecturers. I was asked to say a few words at his memorial service in front of about 200 people – not easy to do when one has recently had oral cancer and one's speech is still slightly impaired due to a paralysed left vocal cord.

I anaesthetised a child of seven for reduction of a fractured wrist who had been prescribed 294 mg (precisely!) of paracetamol six hourly for pain by an F1. This must have provided an unnecessary nursing challenge.

August

My wife had a minor day case operation so I had to briefly reverse roles and become a primary carer with the help of my mother-in-law.

I anaesthetised a 24-year-old woman for a Caesarean who was a severe needle phobic. She told me that when in care ten years before, some other inmates had pinned her down and forcibly tattooed a boy's name on her left forearm. Sadly her baby was born with a very abnormal brain and only survived a few hours.

On the 2nd my oldest friend, Dick Long, whom I had known for 55 years was found unconscious in his home just outside Edinburgh. He died later that day with a massive and previously undiagnosed frontal lobe tumour. Travelling north for his funeral was not easy and had to be rescheduled by train due to the major security alert at UK airports. I then travelled to Ghana on my own for just three days to help out with an anaesthetic crisis on the *Anastasis*. Two days after returning my wife and I flew to Denver, Colorado, to join friend Don and his wife at their cabin in the Cimarron valley. Don and I enjoyed several fantastic fishing trips including a white water rafting expedition 14 miles down the spectacular Black Canyon of the Gunnison River (fig 4).



September

This began with a family party at my mother's house in Scotland for about 65 relatives. She has made a good recovery after her hip replacement and two subsequent dislocations five months before.

I took many photos and produced a framed collage which I then left on a train in Newcastle while en route to visit the new Mercy Ship, the *Africa Mercy*. Luckily I traced it to a lost property office in Glasgow Central station.

A Rotary talk at a hotel in the New Forest taught me a lesson – remember to bring spare batteries for one's powerpoint slide changer. My godson James had his aorta 'banded' at the Brompton. After only six days he was able to walk down Fulham Road. His father, who also had Marfan's, died on a Newcastle operating table twenty six years before while having his aortic arch replaced.

A private 20-year-old gynaecology case was rather unusual. She had requested plastic surgery to her vulva to make her look more like photos on a USA based internet site. I just hope my surgeon friend does not have on going problems with the woman if she is unsatisfied with the result. The next day I did an unusually interesting OAAC which was attended by several women scheduled for elective Caesarean section. Their problems included HIV, severe scoliosis and another who had an IVC filter *in situ* and was on anticoagulants after a recent pulmonary embolus. Another patient had a history two years before of a failed spinal and subsequent failed intubation. She now wanted me to attempt another spinal. Finally a patient for a routine check up six weeks post epidural blood patch became angry when I told her she was fine – she had had problems finding a baby sitter – why could I not have phoned her? – she perhaps had a point.

We went for another week's holiday in the Algarve on our first *EasyJet* flight. The flexible booking terms allowed us to return home two days earlier at minimal extra cost to watch our son effortlessly complete the Windsor Half Marathon in 1hr 40 min. I had also been asked, at less than 24 hours notice, to be the doctor at this event. The St John's ambulance volunteers I supervised had to establish intravenous infusions in

at least ten runners. A regime of one litre of Hartmann's solution, followed by sitting up and commencing oral fluids and then home seemed to work quite well.

The spinal on the patient with the previous RA/intubation failure was successful. During surgery she told me that she was unable to eat either a 'Big Mac' or 'Chunky KitKat' (fig 5) because she cannot open her mouth wide enough.



Maybe one should introduce the 'Big Mac test' or the 'Chunky KitKat criteria' as an indication of mouth opening problems?

The next lady on the list was the one with the IVC filter. Clexane had been stopped 24 hours pre-op and the plan was to restart this and warfarin post surgery. Some hours after uneventful anaesthesia and surgery the filter slipped and had to be removed.

October

From the beginning of the month I had been back at work for a year so am now entitled to take sick leave again on full pay for another six months if necessary. I had started to do more running but my ego took a knock when a 76-year-lady for cataract surgery told me that she had run seven London Marathons, the last of which was in 2000 which was also the last year I had competed. Her time turned out to be 15 min faster!

The next day I took a team of ten to Klaipeda in Lithuania to run a successful two day 'Childbirth Conference'. It was pleasing to find the maternal mortality in that country had fallen by 60% and the regional

anaesthesia rate increased dramatically over the past 10 years.

Sporting wise I enjoyed two days driven partridge and one day's pheasant shooting in venues as diverse as West Meon and Mould. I was clinically challenged by a rather short chunky lady who told me two years before a very competent colleague had taken an hour to insert a spinal needle for a Caesarean. Forewarned I only took 5 min. using a 19g white needle as a longer introducer.

Life continues to be unpredictable particularly for those of us over fifty. A good friend who is a lawyer in London and my half uncle, both younger than me have had minor strokes neither with any apparent predisposing factors.

November

My wife and I boarded a plane to Australia two days after our son had completed his first marathon in a creditable 3hr 44min 23sec in New York.

Melbourne

The Oz trip started with a presentation entitled '*Anaesthetic Adventures in West Africa*' at the SE Private hospital in Melbourne. In the audience was a nurse who had worked on the *Anastasis* in Freetown in 2003 – it's a small world. We stayed with Bob an old friend whom I originally met in 1980 on a primary fellowship course in London and more recently in 1999 at the Sol Snyder Obstetrical Anesthesia conference in San Francisco.

Bob told me he now keeps a paperless record of each patient he anaesthetises by photographing the anaesthetic, drug and fluid chart with a digital camera. This seems an excellent idea.

His other useful tip was when anaesthetising patients who will be prone during surgery for relatively short procedures, he positions them on the table in what for them is a comfortable position before anaesthetising and inserting an LMA.

Clare Valley (100 miles N of Adelaide)

My wife had spent a year in this area in the 1970s and her aunt had lived there most of her adult life, passing away aged 83 in 1998. We stayed near her old family friends for four days in an excellent B and B with a bedroom equipped with a sauna hidden behind a mirror! In this area were 53 wineries and many more vineyards (fig 6).

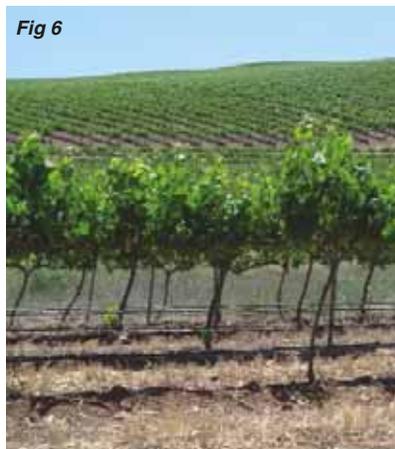


Fig 6

Instead of using cork, wine bottles are sealed using a Stelvin screw cap. This has been shown to prevent 'cork taint' and random oxidation. I decided to become teetotal as my unfortunate necessity of having to dilute wine with water was totally anathema to the wine loving locals.

The countryside was very arid only the odd scattered clump of gum trees breaking the monotony of huge fields of barley stretching as



Fig 7

if almost to infinity. Arrow straight roads also seemed to go on for ever (fig 7).

We visited the Burra copper mine which was worked by miners from Cornwall from 1847-70 and then briefly again a century later. There was the impressive Mophetts engine house and Cornish beam engine similar to those still found in the West Country. We visited the jail where the film '*Breaker Morant*' had been shot. Of particular interest was the impressive diet given to prisoners – fig 8.



Fig 8

Finally my wife bought two original paintings by Auburn artist Gerald Moore with money left by her aunt who was buried in a local graveyard.

Wollongong: (film star – take two!)

At Sydney airport our emotional reunion with the Conteh family originally from Sierra Leone, who had migrated from West Africa in May 2005, was filmed as part of a documentary planned by BBC journalist Caroline. She was delighted with the result which she said was an 'Oscar' winning performance. I had paid for Catherine to have a Caesarean section in Freetown in 1993. After a free upgrade to a large red Mitsubishi saloon with only 10km on the clock we drove to Wollongong where we booked into a suitable hotel not far from 'Dicey Riley's' (fig 9) whose name apparently lived up to its reputation.



It was fantastic meeting the Conteh family again after nearly three years, they seemed to have integrated well into a totally different culture. Catherine is now working at a nursing home prior to starting SEN training, Tina is doing well at St Mary's Star of the Sea girls school to which she won a scholarship last year and Augustine has recently started work as an odd job man at a private clinic.

The following day we enjoyed brunch at the home of good friends of Catherine. Chris was a doctor who was employed as the safety manager at the local steel works. We had some interesting conversations about cancer as he was in the same club as myself (he had carcinoma of the bladder). We discussed the question of deformity v disability – the former can be measured but the latter is entirely psychological.

In the afternoon we took the Contehs to Symbio zoo as both they and I had not yet seen a kangaroo.

The zoo fulfilled all our wishes: we fed kangaroos (fig 10) by hand,



stroked a koala (fig 11), saw crocodiles, camels, emus, wombats, an echidna and fantastic birds the most impressive of which was a white peacock (fig 12).

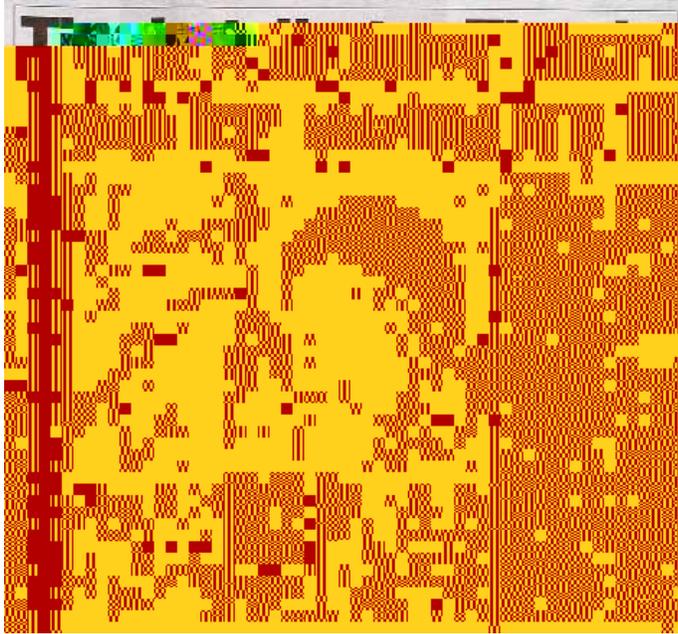
Finally I shot the photo of the trip straight down the wide open mouth of a Tasmanian devil (fig 13), a keeper told me that their maximum jaw pressure is reputed to be 4x greater than that of a pit bull terrier.



I developed an empathy for the world's largest carnivorous marsupial whose numbers in the wild are being decimated by a virulent form of oral cancer of unknown aetiology.

On the Sunday morning we attended an interesting 'healing service' at the Gateway church which was in a former Wollongong cinema. The visiting pastor involved seemed to be shouting at individuals to be healed and some fell to the floor apparently unconscious. For the afternoon the BBC girl + Australian camera crew had organised a barbecue on a picturesque part of Wollongong beach where they did some more filming. About 20 friends of the Contehs joined us, a mixture of both white Australians and fellow migrants. Catherine is a remarkable young woman of whom it would be fair to say that for those who have the privilege of knowing her she seems to make the world a happier place.

Fig 14



90 min drive North of Sydney. Dinner that evening with an old family friend of my wife was followed by essential shopping the following morning and then a final reunion and photos near the opera house with the Conteh family (fig 15).

The next morning I lectured to all 208 girls in Tina's year at school. The presentation was attended by a local reporter and photographer from the *Illawarra Mercury* whose article in the following day's edition was well written (Fig 14).

Sydney

On the first evening we rushed by taxi to the famous opera house to see 'Revolutions,' the Australian Ballet tribute to the late Mikhail Fokine. We saw 'Les Sylphides' the first of a three part 'Ballets Russes' on a surprisingly small monitor screen in the bar but we were then allowed in to experience the fantasy of 'Le Spectre de la rose' and an athletic orgiastic production of 'Scheherazade' complete with an impressively muscled 'golden slave!'

The next day we were entertained by members of the Australian board of *Mercy Ships* to an excellent lunch at the sailing club in Gosford about



Fig 15

Tina was wearing the essential teenage fashion accessory I had given her namely a 4Gb *Ipod*.

Our final day in Sydney was spent with my sister's sister-in-law and her husband of Hungarian descent. They kindly sailed us round the bay in their power boat and showed us some interesting sights including the residence of Prime Minister John Howard and the waterside penthouse owned by actor Russell Crowe. We viewed the opera house and Sydney harbour bridge from the most photographic vantage point and finally had an excellent lunch of lobster thermidor and chips at a bustling fish market accompanied by friendly gulls and pelicans (fig 16).



Fig 16

We flew back to the UK via Melbourne and then spent the first ten days trying to recover from the effects of an eleven hour time difference.

A lady with an anterior placenta praevia scheduled for elective Caesarean said she was phobic about 'sickness' since the day a fellow 11-year-old school pupil vomited over her and her school books in a bus.

The SpR then delayed her surgery for a week as she was only 37 weeks pregnant and had been wrongly scheduled by another SpR – this was a very unpopular decision for the patient and her husband for whom I had some sympathy. Having a Caesarean can be a big issue for a family and this management was not helpful.

My final November anecdote was being approached by a traffic warden in Slough while parked on a single yellow line. To my surprise all he wanted was to find out whether my car a 150 BHP VW Bora TDI sport might be for sale because he wanted one!

Postscript

It is fantastic to be fit enough to travel again, meeting old friends and making new ones. A year ago I felt that I would never be able to make the long journey to Australia and visit the Conteh family who had been so supportive to me during the worst of my illness and indeed good friends for the past nearly fourteen years. The road to 'normality' for me has been long and at times hard but I now feel I once more have a lot of 'living' to do. Two more acquaintances died while we were down under – my uncle Brian Thomson (obituary in Times and Telegraph) and Michael Warren, the former chairman of *Mercy Ships UK*. Both were well into their ninth decade and neither death was unexpected unlike my friend Dick Long at the beginning of August.

Life on this Earth remains and always will do totally unpredictable. One should live it to the full as you never know what is round the corner or what the next day will bring.