

Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells

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There is a tradition of writing letters to editors which has echoes elsewhere in the world but for which the British are renowned. The activity is primarily noted in its most vociferous form in relation to newspapers, often of the local variety but not without their national counterparts, most famously *The Times*. Indeed, while some sources claim that the original 'disgusted' penned missives were to the London Times, others claim that it was the editor of the town rag in Tunbridge Wells itself who, discovering a dearth of correspondence, encouraged his own editorial team to write anonymous letters to fill the columns and thereby also stimulate further contributions.

Whatever the truth, and I suspect I may be risking the arrival of some 'disgusted' letters on this very subject pointing out my appalling ignorance of the real history, the underlying theme remains very clear. Being able to express one's observations, thoughts and opinions in public through the conduit of a publication is seen as a vital function, a measure of how open and robust a society is in its approach to liberalism and free thinking. The only caveat to this is that the origin of the Tunbridge Wells letters was anonymous, also sometimes hidden behind the veil of 'name and address supplied', whereas we at the *BDJ* insist on the correspondent's name being published with their letter, except in very rare personal circumstances.

E-DISGUSTED

With the advent of the electronic age the overwhelming majority of correspondence we receive is now via email and much of it is received within a short time after each issue of the journal is published. In recent years we have encouraged a wide range and variety of letters from the UK and abroad, on clinical matters and business concerns, on health, politics, some with a touch of humour, some with more than a hint of paranoia but all written with passion and with sincerity.

We are now delighted to reveal the beginnings of our new rapid response feature on the letters pages online, by which readers can respond electronically to any of the letters in the journal and have their response published online as it is received rather than forming up in the queue for space in the next available print issue. From this point of view we have been somewhat victims of our own success since the number of letters received has increased considerably while the pages available, in order to keep a balance of the other content, have not.

A 'Readers' Comments' section now appears at the bottom of each letter on the *BDJ* website. Anyone wishing to comment

simply needs to register as a user and agree to the Terms and Conditions and Community Guidelines in order to add their comments and thoughts. For those concerned about the potential lack of control inherent in online communication when compared with emails and letters sent directly to the Editor, I should point out that all comments are reviewed by the editorial team prior to posting in order to make sure that they contain nothing offensive or defamatory. In addition, readers may report any comments they consider to be abusive or inappropriate and this will result in their removal pending further review. Finally, I should also say that this is in addition to, not a replacement for, the traditional method of sending letters to the Editor by email or post for publication in the printed Journal.

We continue to encourage all methods of correspondence as it is my belief that the *BDJ* should be a place for discussion, debate and disagreement as well as considered comment, current thinking and consensus. Consequently, I think that the journal, this journal, should provide the opportunity for debate among us all as professional and scientific colleagues and practitioners whose primary consideration is the care and well being of our patients.

As has been demonstrated in these columns in recent years, there are many topics on which we cannot agree. When harangued at meetings, on the phone or occasionally in the street and asked why I allowed such-and-such a paper to see the light of day, or this-and-that of a letter that is regarded to be the merest lightweight of a truth to be published, I have to say that I am only an editor, not a fount of all knowledge. Most often I have not the faintest notion of where the truth lies but I do have the conviction that collectively we have the opportunity of approaching it more closely by exchanging our experiences and various wisdoms. While it should always be courteous it may not necessarily be palatable. As in parliament the opening 'my honourable friend' may well euphemistically hide a torrent of invective; 'with the greatest respect' usually heralds a message composed of quite the opposite sentiment. But this is the nature of grown-up progress and we will be the poorer for turning aside from it and certainly for failing to provide the means for its airing.

So, as we await the great electron-mediated pearls of wisdom to tumble into the capacitor of reason we should reflect on how far the printed word has brought us to date and look with excitement towards the distance that new means have in taking us further still. Write on in happy disgust.

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