

Wish you were here

Writing postcards used to be such a ritual but how many of us bother anymore, and are they still relevant?

When designers of film or stage sets come to construct office, workplace or come to that dental practice interiors for performances based in the late twentieth century, one essential feature will have to be the notice board covered with postcards from fellow staff. Stuck on with blu-tack, gradually ageing sellotape or skewered to a corkboard with drawing pins, the colourful pictures screamed out from all corners of the globe. Mostly from Europe, quite a few from the good old UK itself but just a few from exotic places. Disney World, Orlando. New Delhi and the Taj Mahal. The Sydney Opera House from Jean visiting her son and daughter-in-law in Watson's Bay.

Maybe I'm wrong but I don't think that happens so much now. In fact, does anyone write postcards anymore? What a sad loss. What we really miss most is the clichéd messages on the back. The tediously obvious

'wish you were here', the reassuring missive from a honeymooner 'wonderful hotel not sure what the rest of the resort is like' or alternatively the slightly more concerning 'hotel OK, been out and about most of the time.' Then those delightful 'hotel not yet finished, under canvas in the car park, can't wait to get back' cries of woe which you knew meant that you were in for endless stories of hardship from the moment Beverley got back.

Admittedly they can be a bit of a chore to complete when you're away. That gnawing realisation of the duty you have to fulfil for the folks back home slaving away at the tooth-face. I well remember an object lesson in paying attention to elders and betters in this respect. Burdened by that same obligation as a schoolboy on an educational trip to Germany I had obediently bought a half dozen varied shots of famous churches in Bremen to gratefully write off to relatives who had helped sponsor the journey. Sitting, having completed one and a bit in the youth hostel common room, I was joined by a prefect from the year above, with a pile of about 15 cards.

'That's going to take you a while,' I ventured.

'No, be done in a five minutes,' was his confident reply.

I watched in awe as he marshalled the cards, a matching number of postage stamps, a sheet of peel-off sticky labels with the addressees already typed and a John Bull printing set. The process was as follows: postcard, address label, postage stamp, printing holder to ink pad – impression on postcard – 'Kind regards, Hugh.' Genius.

So what happens now? Well, probably email instead. It's so much easier isn't it? A hot backstreet internet café in Rome, a hotel lobby in Tel Aviv, a WiFi connection in your bedroom suite in Croatia straight to the Smile More Practice reception at home. Of course it has huge advantages. Timeliness for a start, it arrives while the sender is still away compared with a

postcard that used to turn up about a week after they get back. Plus length, detail and attached pictures.

Although are these really advantages? For the sender perhaps but for those of us left behind? The value for both writer and recipient of a postcard is its brevity. With large handwriting, a swirly signature and perhaps a little cartoony-thing drawing, the space would be filled and tossed into a postbox. Similarly for the reader. 'Oh, Roger's having a great time. Nice of him to remember us.' End of story. Just like when Roger gets back to the practice. All we want to really know are very brief edited highlights. Was it good/bad? Did he have reasonable weather? ...and on to the next patient. What we never want in answer to the question, 'how was your holiday?' is a deep breath and a diatribe beginning 'well when we left for the airport...'

And it's the same with emails. Instead of a small space bordered by captions that read 'Copenhagen at night time' and 'Printed by A. Anderson in Denmark' there is now an infinite amount of screen to fill and an endless amount of attachments to attach. Messages come through that can take half the morning to read, print and distribute around the practice with pics of a favourite waiter by the breakfast buffet, Terry and Melissa at the traditional Swedish night lantern pageant or the family cat sunning itself on the patio of a Cumberland guesthouse.

Quite apart from the quirky things that sometimes make emails the more extraordinary; such as foreign keyboards that inadvertently change the text to 'having a greek time here in Turshey'; or 'look forward to being him next Tuesday'.

So, on balance, make the effort: shun the electronic revolution for a week or so each year and hit that rack of slightly soiled, passing traffic-jaded postcards. All we need to know is that you wished we were there.

This article was penned entirely on a single postcard by Stephen Hancocks while on holiday in Greece. Gratefully received by his colleagues back home.

