HASLAM'S VIEW



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Identifying specimens has never been my strong point

'I BET YOU'VE NO IDEA WHAT THIS IS,' HE SAID. THRUSTING HIS HAND DEEP INTO HIS BACK pocket, my 74-year-old patient pulled out a small pebble-like object and held it up.

What on earth was it? I had thought the consultation had come to an end. He was proffering me a curious organic object. Could it be a gallstone? I really wasn't sure.

I have to admit that identifying specimens has never been my strong point. Indeed, the world of pathology and I did not get off to a particularly auspicious start.

In my first term at medical school, our group was being shown a selection of histology slides projected onto the screen in the tutorial room. Feeling disinterested and confused I started talking quietly to the equally bored student next to me.

Suddenly the slide projector was turned off. The lights went on. I had been rumbled. 'Haslam,' roared the lecturer. 'I'm glad to see you know so much about histology that you can chat away while I'm trying to instill some knowledge into your fellow students. Perhaps you would care to describe the slide I was just showing.'

Panic. Sheer panic. What on earth was it? It was no good hoping that any of my colleagues might slip me a note with the answer. I simply couldn't think of anything to say.

'Is there nothing you can say about the slide on the screen?' went on our lecturer. 'I don't expect a detailed histopathological description from the likes of you, but perhaps a simple summary of what I was talking about would be a start.'

There was still silence. I had absolutely no idea what he was on about.

'He was proffering me a curious organic object. Could it be a gallstone? I really wasn't sure'

'Come now,' he said, getting impatient. 'Anything will do. When you are a clinician, if that day should ever arrive, you won't be able to sit there in silence when you don't know what's wrong with a patient. You will have to say something. Anything. Is there absolutely nothing you can tell me about that slide?'

'Well, yes,' I said, eventually managing to find my tongue. 'It was pink.'

The group giggled. 'Is that it?' he spluttered unbelievingly. 'Pink?' I could see the despair on the poor man's face. Then, suddenly the heat was off as he turned to the rest of the group. 'There's no need for you lot to look so smug,' he snapped. 'At least Haslam here told me something about it. I'm not sure all of you would've managed quite such a precise description.' And with despairing cynicism he sought out a new victim.

While these memories of pathology tutorials come flooding back, my memory of my patient's proffered specimen was even weirder. My confusion clearly delighted him.

'Give up, do you?' I agreed that I hadn't a clue. But I will never forget his explanation. 'It's a new potato,' he said. 'I've been carrying it around with me for the past 17 years. It worked wonders for my shoulders.' I must have looked puzzled.

'Ain't you ever heard of that one?' he asked. 'It's a well known treatment round these parts. If you get pain in your shoulder, all you need is a new potato. Just put it in your back pocket. As it shrivels away all the pain goes with it. I used to have dreadful rheumatism but since I've had this potato, I've been fine. Can you explain that, doctor?'

Well, doctor. Just, where do you start?

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