

HASLAM'S VIEW



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The enduring power of print

I LOVE BOOKS. FOR YEARS THEY HAVE BEEN A QUITE EXTRAORDINARY AND ABIDING

passion. My books are among my most cherished possessions. I remember one particular teacher, Mr Blake, who spent almost an entire English lesson teaching us how to treat books. To this day I can picture the loving way he taught us to open a new book, implying that if we damaged its spine we were little more than Philistines.

Nothing really explains the ludicrous number of books that clutter up my study at home.

I should have realised I had a problem when I needed to start a second shelf for 'books I have purchased but haven't yet read'.

It is, of course, ludicrously wasteful to spend money on yet more books if you already have an unread pile waiting to be opened. Yet I have always had this naïve belief that somehow the mere act of owning a book was in some way beneficial, as if the contents could simply transfer by osmosis into one's brain, through the simple act of ownership.

Indeed, Mark Twain once wrote: 'In a good bookroom you feel in some mysterious way that you are absorbing the wisdom contained in all the books through your skin, without even opening them.'

We both might have believed this. If only it were true.

But books seem threatened. The arrival of the Kindle and ebooks are changing the whole way we consume the written word. They are fantastically useful, particularly while on holiday or travelling, where a fortnight's worth of reading can be

contained in a space smaller than a paperback. But it's just not the same. Finishing a book on a Kindle never has quite the same feeling of completion as reaching the end of a printed tome. When it comes to medical textbooks, these too feel as if they are threatened by online reference works. Textbooks of dermatology, for instance, are probably redundant for GPs when every rash is just a click away on the internet.

'There is certainly a particular place for books that are there for all time on your shelves, ready to stimulate, challenge, in a way that no online work could ever achieve'

But there is still a place for books in medicine. Proper books. There is certainly a particular place for books that make you think, that you want to dip in and out of, that you want to scribble on in the margins, that are there for all time on your shelves, ready to stimulate, challenge, reinvigorate, in a way that no online work could ever achieve.

I'm thinking of books such as Roger Neighbour's classic *Inner Consultation*, or more recently *Intelligent Kindness: Reforming the Culture of Healthcare* by John Ballatt and Penelope Campling, or Margaret McCartney's *The Patient Paradox*. These books I need to hold in my hand, not store in my Kindle.

And I've noticed something else. Many of the books on sale in book shops seem to be becoming much more beautiful — items that can be treasured for years to come. There are ranges of classics being republished with stunning cover art or with special bindings. New hardbacks seem better designed than even a few years ago. The printed word seems to be fighting back, offering something much more than mere content.

I've often felt that there were similarities between books and medical records. The Lloyd George envelope is hopelessly inadequate as a storage method for modern medical records.

Indeed no one is more committed than I am to the power and potential of the electronic medical record.

But picking up a blockbuster of a thick file, or seeing the range of handwriting of doctors from years gone by, or the scribbled diagrams, or pencilled asides, can tell you something extra, something that the computer can't quite provide.

I would never want to go back, but embracing and supporting change doesn't mean you have to deny that something else might have been lost.

And I never ever want to lose my books.

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