I doubt if many people appreciate the degree of anxiety that may be associated with the first clinical trial of a new drug, particularly one used in a largely non-fatal disease in childhood. I will never forget the little boy with raised transaminase concentrations who was in the Intal trial. At first, I did not realise that his pretreatment levels were high and I was unaware that he had had only a harmless placebo and not cromoglycate. In the event, disodium cromoglycate has proved to be one of the safest drugs ever introduced into medicine.

For many years, an unreasonable fear of using steroids in children with asthma led to much unnecessary suffering and many unnecessary deaths. Of the several hundred children I have known who were treated with long-term steroids, those who died did so because of insufficient dosage and not from side effects of steroid overdose.

Epidemiological implications

I developed an interest in the epidemiological aspects of asthma in childhood. In 1966 I noted a curious rise in the number of deaths that has never been fully explained and I later found evidence which suggested, to me at least, that our increasingly affluent society has experienced an appreciable rise in the prevalence of asthma and atopic disease in childhood. Today, hay fever seems very frequent. Most people easily recognise it. We have seen its occurrence in recent years in

immigrant peoples who never experienced it when they lived in the tropics. Several curious epidemiological findings may provide clues to fundamental understanding and prevention of allergic disease in children with an inherited susceptibility. Asthma and eczema are more common in children of immigrant parents when they have been born in England than when they have been born in the countries from which their parents came. Some environmental factor operates at a very early stage in life, possibly even before birth. As yet we have no explanation for the sex difference in asthma and eczema which is most evident in early childhood (before sexual maturation).

Attitudes to asthma and allergic disease have changed greatly in the past 25 years. Much research is now carried out in departments of medicine and elsewhere. The pharmaceutical industry invests millions in the development of new drugs. I think we should not, however, forget the contribution of those who founded and sustained the Asthma Research Council, nor should we forget that some of the greatest contributions have been made by our colleagues in veterinary medicine. Perhaps the veterinary scientists were less affected by the "smoke-screen" of psychosomatic medicine. It takes very clear sight to see through any prevailing popular medical theory of unexplained disease in any generation. Who would dare to question the role of IgE today? Important it must be, but we need to look beyond it to explain fully most clinical manifestations of this common and distressing group of diseases. Such is the scale on which interest has now developed that progress seems to me to be assured.

Reading for Pleasure

Fairy tales for father and child

ALAN B SHRANK

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I reckon that I read and comprehend over 300 words a minute, so that on an average day I must consume upwards of 50 000 words, or a staggering total of over 18 million words a year. The realisation that so few of them give any profit, let alone pleasure, and that many of them give actual discomfort should they actually penetrate my consciousness, is even more disturbing.

The day starts with the newspaper, which used to be *The Times*, read, with luck, before breakfast. Read for the sake of information—much of it painful by its very nature in both content and style—it was tempered by some fun: Bernard Levin's wit, although prolix, was nearly always worth while (and I miss him) and occasionally a letter to the editor touched a sensitive spot, either with a neat turn of phrase or a spark of enlightenment. The morning post is read over breakfast, which usually consists of hot porridge—my one concession to the current dietary fad. Pleasure is not to be found, that is certain, in reading bills, agendas, minutes, and reports, though sometimes I derive petty amusement from spotting in them the split infinitive

and the clause that begins with a "not only" not followed by one with a "but also" (about the only two solecisms that survive in my memory from schooldays).

At work, the letters from colleagues about patients are strictly matter-of-fact. The journals I read in the library are read for profit, too, but the demands of editors force so many contributors to present their material in a stiff and curt manner that few articles are a good read. So, where in my day is there the reading for pleasure?

Out of work

Well, I look forward to those unaccompanied journeys on the train that take me to meetings so far away from Shrewsbury that there is time to read and muse; London is three hours away, and Birmingham one hour. In the past year I've had to go to Belfast twice, to Norwich, Brighton, York, and London at least a dozen times, and even once to Torquay. All these trips provided precious hours away from colleagues, away from patients, away from the telephone and, sadly also, away from my family. On the train it doesn't take long to read the papers for the meeting, and then out comes my book. My choice over the last six months or so shows my taste or lack of it.

On my way to Belfast I spotted *Dear Me* on the bookstall at Manchester Airport, and Peter Ustinov's anecdotal auto-

biography provided at least four happy hours. The humour sparkles as he describes, without malice, other people's discomfort, so much so that an uncomfortable journey was soon over. His voice is so striking that I thought I could actually hear him telling the story to me. I saw so many of his plays and films when I was young, that reading of the problems of their production revived past memories with much added pleasure.

On my next trip I took *The Pioneers* by James Fenimore Cooper. Until recently, we had a superb secondhand bookshop in Shrewsbury, and on my last visit there I succumbed to a beautifully bound set of his novels, which included one of my favourite childhood tales, *The Last of the Mohicans*. I'd failed to remember the extraordinary, almost obsessional, detail of Victorian novels and the dearth of action. Nevertheless, the precision of the narrative and the description of the way of life of early New Englanders were so compelling that I almost wanted to visit the New England scene, even though it must be quite different now. The novel moves so slowly that I haven't finished it yet, and there are nine other tales to go. It reminded me of the struggle that I had at the age of 8 trying to read my way through the trials of Amyas Leigh in *Westward Ho!*

Further reading of this book was fortunately interrupted by the arrival of Christmas presents. My brother-in-law, Geoffrey Healey, gave me his latest book *More Healeys*. Although I was unable to afford any sort of car (and certainly not a Sprite) when I was a junior doctor, I remember greatly envying their owners. The easy style and the exciting story of the development of new racing cars explained much to me of my brother-in-law's approach to life, as well as the fun to be had as an owner of such cars. Again, the anecdotes come out alive from the page, and the voice of the author could be heard. I couldn't appreciate all the technical arguments—just as Geoff wouldn't understand the complement cascade, but can still enjoy medical stories—but the description, for example, of the time the paintwork on a racing Sprite was said to be dangerous at a Le Mans race in order to disqualify it, needs nothing but chauvinism to enjoy it.

Perhaps the most enjoyable Christmas present was my wife's find of an English translation of Palladio's *I Quattro Libri dell' Architettura*. If I hadn't taken up medicine I suspect that I should have become an architect, and Andrea Palladio is any architect's mentor. Reading this book with its simple drawings of classical buildings, Palladio's interpretation of them and his wise instructions on design of all parts of buildings, bridges, and roads gave me instant pleasure—particularly because it allowed me to relive a superb holiday in the Veneto that we had last year.

Sharing the children's joy

Although I've thoroughly enjoyed these books, undoubtedly the greatest pleasure I have had in my reading this last year has been that of reading to my children before they go to sleep. There is both the enjoyment of reading a book that you didn't read when small and the vicarious joy of watching children enjoy the story. My daughter has a thirst for reading that only sleep quenches, and she will sit enthralled as one chapter after another unfolds. She hides books under her pillow, under the bathroom mat, under cushions, and under dolls so that every spare moment can be spent in reading. And so I have read all the Narnia stories by C S Lewis; fun as tales, laced with his Christianity, but written in lucid and interesting prose. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* reminded me of my evacuee days in Somerset, and *The Horse and His Boy* of a couple of weeks spent in scruffy Egypt in 1963, and a few days in peaceful Iran in 1975. I never read *The Last Battle*, because my wife said it was too horrific for children, but my son has since read it himself and he thought that it was safe for me to read after all. I'm sure that they'll enjoy them all over again when they reread them for themselves.

I've also had to read most of the Arthur Ransome books. I can't say that they gave me the pleasure obviously experienced by my children. I have too many memories of sailing and fishing in wet and cold waters around Cornwall, which I did not enjoy much: a "wet arse and no fish," as the Cornish say, always seemed to be my lot. Still, their enthusiasm was infectious and I could enjoy quanting and tacking on the Lakes and the Broads without getting wet. And then we discovered Roald Dahl. We've read most of the hilarious novels, and we have revelled in the magic and the fantasy, and marvelled at the superb skill with which heroes and villains alike always outwit their opponents. If only we could do the same in real life.

But perhaps short stories provide the best entertainment because a story can be completed each evening. We all had the greatest laughs from Isaac Bashevis Singer's *When Schlemiel went to Warsaw* and *Zlateh the Goat*; I kept on stopping because I wanted to read to myself at greater speed, and this the children found irritating, but no one can fail to appreciate the folksy humour and whimsy. Roald Dahl's short stories were also a great success, racing along with that sudden but always pleasant twist near the end. We haven't tried horror stories yet. We've now started on *The Hobbit*, and I shall soon be steeped in that mythology. If I can escape from the awful present in this way, who can blame me?

WORDS DEFLATULATE. This word is not in any dictionary. Yet. **FART**, OE *feortan*; Germ verb *furzen*, substantive *Furz*; to pass intestinal gas through the anus. As is the case with several other bodily functions, the descriptive term of Anglo-Saxon origin is monosyllabic, four-lettered, and taboo in what may be linguistically called "polite society," yet freely used and perhaps freely performed within the family circle and the company of intimate friends and comrades. Most of the bodily functions can be described by single words suited to polite society or physiological terminology—for example, eructation, mastication, sternutation, micturition (or preferably miction), defaecation, copulation. But there is no single corresponding word for "fart." Doctors often experience difficulty in making their meaning clear to patients when inquiring about this aspect of bowel function, and both parties tend to use circumlocutory phrases that are capable of being misunderstood. **WIND** is dangerously ambiguous; many patients use this word when they mean abdominal pain. "The passage of wind" evokes the time-wasting question, "Up or down?" "The passage of wind from the back passage" is understood by any patient but is unutterably cumbersome. "Crepitation" was used in the nineteenth century and referred to the acoustic properties of the act. The word is now used for sounds arising in the lungs, bones, joints, or subcutaneous tissues. In my lecture to the Listerian Society at King's College Hospital in 1974 I proposed that the act of passing rectal flatus be termed **DEFLATULATION** in circumstances unsuited to the

monosyllabic alternative. This single word is self-explanatory, and I suggest it be adopted for medical, and perhaps general, usage.

Chaucer's use of fart suggests that in his day the word could be used without embarrassment.

"This Nicholas anon let flee a fart"

As greet as it had been a thonder-dent (-clap)."

and again, writing about the elegant parish clerk, Absolon,

"He was somdel squaymous (somewhat squeamish) of farting."¹

The Elizabethans used "ventosyte" (ventosity) to describe either a state of gaseous distension, or the gas-forming potential of certain foods.² In the latter sense, **VENTOSITY** is a word that merits revival. By what seems an unfortunate choice of word, the slit in the lower edge of a jacket at the rear is known in tailoring as the vent.

Many people believe that retention of rectal flatus is harmful. An epitaph in Leyland churchyard, Lancashire, says so in verse.³

Let the wind go free

Where'er thou be

For 'twas the wind

That killéd me.

A clear case of ileus.

¹ Chaucer, G., *The Canterbury Tales (The Miller's Tale)*. Ca 1387.

² O'Hara-May, J., *Elizabethan Dietary of Health*. Lawrence, Kansas, Coronado Press, 1977.

³ Silcock, A., *Verse and Worse*. London, Faber and Faber, 1958.