databases ... disappointed the hospital still hasn't subscribed to whatever site on the internet. *[pausing to think]* He takes a lot of time with the parents.

CONSULTANT. Why didn't he just ring me or the A+E consultant?

SHO. Oh no ... he says the modern palm top has made consultants pretty much redundant. You can get everything you want off the computer.

REGISTRAR *[entering the room]* I've got it ... about the steroids I mean ... oh *[looking about]* ... You haven't gone and given the antibiotics have you?

CONSULTANT. Yes.

REGISTRAR. Oh great, that's a completely different question now isn't it ... steroids after antibiotics. No, no, it's okay, I'll sort it out. Don't do anything else till I come back.

Registrar exits, stage left, looking annoyed.

CONSULTANT. Can you phone PICU, let them know she's down here. I'd better go and talk to the parents.

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POSTCARD FROM DOWN UNDER

Fearful children

I smile a lot at children, a professional habit carried over into a character trait. The smile goes something like this: first catching the eye of the child, who is usually watchful and cautious, then a broad smile with lips closed, followed very closely by a widening of the eyes and then perhaps a wiggle of the eyebrows. This is often enough to make a child smile back, although I'm painfully aware that some children will be quite worried by a stranger smiling at them, and some will regard it as a false gesture—nothing more than a professional quirk with no underlying feeling.

When not at work and wandering around the supermarket or down the high street, I often look at children because, for one thing, it is good to see them behaving naturally outside of a hospital setting. When they catch my eye I find myself responding with my professional smile, at which point, if I remember that I'm not at work, I'm suddenly chillingly aware of all the ways that this could be misinterpreted in a frightened, suspicious, and protective world. I am suddenly a strange man smiling at a strange child, with all that this might imply. If the child responds with a smile, then the chill deepens. Have I just unwittingly undermined a lifetime of sensible caution about strangers instilled into this child by caring parents? Have I just inserted the thin end of the wedge into the principle that all strangers are not to be trusted by tricking a child into trusting me with a smile? At work the situation is different, with the parents' presence and participation in the communication labeling me "Not a Stranger". Not known well of course, but to be trusted. Occasionally, in the high street when I forget myself and I—forgive me—smile at a child, the parents see me, and the look that they give me is enough to make me give up smiling at children forever. The fearful suspicion, the rapid appraisal—male, tall, not old, fairly well dressed, doesn't "look" like a pervert—and the eventual conclusion (that I'm probably not a threat at the moment) is soul destroying.

Recently, we have been lucky enough to travel in South East Asia, and more specifically in Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos. Everything that I have learnt about child protection and about the acts we are attempting to

protect the children from tells me that these children are being hurt here as much as anywhere else in the world, with cultural and social taboos accounting for the relatively low levels of reporting, discussion, and awareness. Perhaps as a result of this, or maybe as a feature of the national character, parents in these countries seem to actively encourage their children to wave to and talk with *falangs* (foreigners). Often, as you approach a group of adults with a child, you'll hear a rapid discussion directed at the child with the word *falang* in it, and then you'll see the child begin to wave, supported and spurred on by the adults in the group. The whole group will be happy and laughing. We walked past a school playground where a group of 5 or 6 year olds were just being let out to play. Shouts of happiness were mingled with cries of "falang!", a cue to run to the fence and laugh and wave and shout at us. Imagine this in our world. An infant school class running to the playground fence to wave at a passing stranger. This would be the cue for a gentle but firm lesson for everyone about the dangers of strangers and talking to them. Maybe the community policeman would be summoned to give a talk or lead a workshop. Notes would be sent to parents.

So what am I saying? Of course, what I am emphatically not saying is that we should teach our children to trust strangers again. It is undeniably a good thing that in our society we have gone some way to removing the taboos and other restrictions that would prevent us from recognising the fact that children are sometimes harmed. But, for want of a better analogy, have we thrown the baby out with the bath water? Is it right that I should feel like a suspected pervert if I smile at a child in the high street, supermarket, or park? Is it right that I worry about the desensitising effect that my smile might have on the carefully hardened, streetwise child?

It is a shame to have to travel halfway around the world to be reminded that a smile from a child is one of the simplest, most uplifting pleasures in a serious and demanding life.

I D WACOGNE

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