

Dr Tim Saunders

Some reflections on my life in General Practice at Tarvin Road and Heath Lane Medical Centre's. Well....it seems like only yesterday...but clearly it's not....I've been here for more than 32 years now! You know you're getting old when the brand new hospital, the Royal Liverpool, that we were the first students into in 1978/79 has been 'condemned' and is due to be replaced by a new one!

I qualified in 1983 and have worked as an NHS doctor for 38 years, which is over half of the time the NHS has been in existence!

I remember meeting the then partners of the practice at the Tarvin Road Surgery in 1988. I asked Dr Allan Pullin how long he had been a partner, and his answer of '20 years' seemed like an unfathomably long time, a lifetime in fact, in comparison to the 6 or 12 month posts I had held up until that point.

1988....It was a long time ago....19 year old Kylie Minogue was just starting her career; Wet Wet Wet, Fairground Attraction and Phil Collins were all in the charts....Margaret Thatcher had just been re-elected for the third time the year before...and Tony Blair and 'New Labour' were just a twinkle in Gordon Brown's eye!!

I think we've had thirteen Secretaries of State for Health since then and any number of NHS organisational reforms! We've had FPC's FHSA's LHA's, DHA's, DMU's, AHA's, RHA's, SCHA, GPFH, PCG's, PCT's, CCG's & RO's....quite possibly more abbreviations than 'Line of Duty'!!

I took over from Dr Sid Birchett who had recently retired as senior partner and the practice consisted of Dr Henry Bodsworth, Dr Allan Pullin and myself as full time GPs and Dr Frances Evans-Jones who was part-time. In those days we had a part-time practice nurse, a secretary and a hard-working team of reception staff. One early memory is coming in one Monday morning to start my surgery only to find that Sid had been in over the weekend and taken his desk and chair home! The telephone was perched on a pile of books on the floor!! An emergency trip to the office suppliers with Henry procured a replacement and we were up and running again in no time at all! Sid was a legend in the medical world in Chester, he was well known for his medical acumen and for an earlier habit of writing surgical referrals in rhyming couplets. I understand that one of the surgeons kept quite a collection of them for a while!

The world was very different back in 1988. Personal computers were in their infancy and everything was paper-based and handwritten. Medical records consisted of the brown 'Lloyd George' envelopes and cards and entries would often be a single word or two in barely legible doctors scrawl (in fountain pen of course!). The repeat prescribing system used a cardex system and all repeat prescriptions were handwritten by the reception staff before being checked and signed by the doctors.

I remember Allan Pullin bringing in a BBC Micro-computer (state of the art at the time!!) for the secretary to try 'word processing' for our referral letters. The envelopes still had to be typed on a proper typewriter of course! All clinical communication with colleagues at the hospital, blood test results and x-ray results were on paper and came in regular deliveries by van.

These were the days before mobile phones (apart from the occasional City Boy with his big hand-held brick...) and a significant proportion of our patients didn't even have a landline at home. They relied on a stack of coins and the payphone at the end of the road. This presented a significant communication challenge especially when 'on call'.

At the time the NHS had very strict rules restricting the number of doctors who could work together to provide out of hours on call cover. I think the maximum number was ten doctors in a rota. We worked together with Drs John & Shirley Charles-Jones of the Upton Practice and Dr Mike Swallow who was a single handed practitioner in Dee Hills Park. When 'on call' it either required someone to be at home to answer the phone (for the whole weekend) or use of an answering machine to take messages when out visiting. It was not unusual to have completed a visit on one side of city, to have checked with home or the answerphone that there were no other outstanding calls, only to get home to find that another call had come in....frequently from a house in the street next to where you had just been! I've had the pleasure of various quirky calls and requests over the years, from being 'phoned at 02.00am by a patient to tell me they couldn't sleep to being asked by a lovely elderly lady if I would be kind enough to pick up her fish order from the fishmongers on my way to visiting her!

We always needed a supply of coins to hand for phone boxes ('phone boxes' are those things that internet access points or defibrillators are in nowadays...).

Life at home was revolutionised when we moved over to a call handling service and communicated with them via hand held VHF radios....very modern!

Clinical practice has also changed dramatically. For example, we used to manage myocardial infarctions (heart attacks) in people's homes. Nowadays, anyone with cardiac chest pain is whisked off to the nearest cardiac catheter lab for immediate angiography and stenting.

Back in the 1980's in Chester's hospitals there were four Consultant Physicians, four General Surgeons, four Orthopaedic Surgeons and four Obstetrician and Gynaecologists. Now....it's difficult to be sure....but there are something like twenty-three consultants across Cardiology, Respiratory, Diabetes & Endocrinology and Gastroenterology (which were previously served by the four consultant physicians). I think there are eight General Surgeons, twelve Orthopaedic surgeons and seven O&G consultants. In addition there are several other 'ology departments that have sprung up over time. We certainly haven't seen the same degree of expansion in the General Practice workforce over the same time period!

In the early 1990's we acquired the Machinery workshop site on Heath Lane behind the Peacock pub and I led the project to build the 'new' surgery which became operational in 1994 as Heath Lane Medical Centre. It's still the 'new' surgery to me....even though we've been here for 27 years!

Dr Chris Fryar joined the partnership in 1995 after Allan Pullin's retirement.

Following Henry's and then Frances's retirements (and Dr Wanda Hargreaves move to pastures new) the two of us have run the practice together ever since.

One thing that became evident to me early on in my time as a GP was that many people were struggling with their mental health and had significant problems with depression and anxiety disorders. There were no services open to support people with these problems, no such thing as access to talking therapies. At that time, 30 odd years ago, mental health specialists would only see people with psychotic or severe mental illness. Everyone else was referred to as 'the worried well', a terrible term which belittled the impact of anxiety and depressive disorders on many people's lives. Along came 'GP Fund Holding', an initiative that gave us as GPs some degree of control over some elements of healthcare resources. Amongst other things, this control enabled us to initially provide access to a counsellor for those of our patients who needed it. Over the next few years, working with

other practices and Chester and Halton Community Trust, we were able to develop a primary care mental health team that provided a service to everyone across the city and subsequently the surrounding rural areas. We worked with colleagues in other parts of the country who were developing similar services and these collective efforts eventually led to the national initiative of IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) which recognised the importance of access to talking therapies of various sorts for the large number of people who were affected by anxiety and depressive disorders. It is now compulsory for Health Service Commissioners to provide this service in every part of the country.

I was the 'GP Mental Health Lead' for the various iterations of Health Service Commissioners for 20 odd years and enjoyed bringing my day-to-day clinical experience to the wider development of health care services. Improving access to mental health services for all ages remains a big challenge for the health service and much still needs to be done, particularly in light of the consequences of the COVID pandemic.

Modern General Practice is quite different to practice at the start of my career. Some numbers....I estimate that I have carried out in the order of a couple of hundred thousand consultations of one sort or another during my working life. I've been responsible for several million acute and repeat prescriptions and I can't begin to imagine how many blood tests, x-rays and investigations I've ordered over the years. I must have cost the NHS a fortune!! They'll be glad to see the back of me!!

Mobile phones became smart phones, computers everywhere, everything digitalised, links to the hospital etc etc, changes in medical and surgical care (but the people I work with, and for, are just the same!)

If you had told me in 1988 that I would complete my career having experienced a deadly global viral pandemic and that I would be able to consult with patients via video call on their smart phones, whilst checking their test results on my computer linked to the Hospital and sending their prescriptions electronically to their Pharmacy of choice, I just wouldn't have had a clue what you were talking about!!

The COVID pandemic has had an impact on all of our lives in one way or another and we are all aware that it has produced profound changes and challenges to the NHS. The NHS will need to continue to change and evolve to meet these and other challenges in the years ahead.

It has been a privilege to be an NHS GP, to have worked with great colleagues and to have provided medical care to all our patients over these past thirty-two years or so at Tarvin Road and Heath Lane Medical Centre's.

Now... where are those Golf clubs...??

