



James Drife

When I was an undergraduate quite a few of my fellow students came from medical families. I felt a bit inferior because although my father was a bank manager there were no doctors on our family tree. There was a Reverend Drife and a Miss Drife, MA, but no Dr Drife as yet. My mother had qualified as a physiotherapist, however, and she tried to convince me that I had medical genes, or at least genes allied to medicine.

The doctors' kids in our year were matter-of-fact about their hereditary status. It was no big deal to them or the rest of us, but sometimes a clinical teacher would pick up on a surname – particularly an unusual one – and ask, 'Any relation to ...?' Then the student would bashfully admit to being an associate member, as it were, of the club we were all trying to join.

One or two were clearly set on carrying on the family business and taking over Dad's practice, but others were keen to assert their independence and try something new. After all, this was Britain in the Swinging Sixties. Social upheaval was under way. So, as long-haired rebellion swept across the campus, GPs' children became specialists and specialists' children became GPs. Man, those were crazy times.

What I noticed most was that the doctors' children had cars. They were not flashy and they sometimes broke down but they were warm and dry, unlike my scooter. It is possible to look suave and sexy on two wheels but not on a 90cc bike and not in an Edinburgh blizzard. I couldn't afford leathers so I used to wear two pairs of trousers and an extra overcoat. Covered in snow, I would lumber across the car park with my spectacles steaming up, like a myopic yeti.

Looking back, it's amazing that I ever got married, but I did, and to a doctor's daughter at that. Suddenly there were two Dr Drifes on the register. As our children grew up we took pains to avoid hinting that there should be any more. We weren't going to influence them. And yet ... There is always that thought at the back of your mind. Why else did we keep our old textbooks in a cupboard and our half-skeleton in the attic?

Some doctors try to put their children off medicine. In the mining village where I was brought up, my schoolmates' dads, particularly the well-paid coalface workers, would tell their sons how horrible it was down

the pit and how they should never become a miner. Of course this made the boys determined to do just that. Talking to students I've noticed that some medical parents do the same, with the same result.

So my wife and I studiously avoided talking about our jobs as the house filled up with medical journals and the phone kept ringing in the night. Every Christmas Day, though, we would go round the hospital as a family. Our children grew up believing that this was how everybody spent Christmas morning – taking your presents to show the midwives and peeping into a cradle at a genuine Christmas baby.

Eventually, in line with today's gender preferences, our son became a lawyer and our daughter became a doctor. It's a strange feeling, having a child at medical school. Expensive, of course – after all, she must have a car, mustn't she? Our daughter went to Edinburgh, which meant being taught by some of our old pals. 'Any relation to ...?' She told us that answering this question was character-building, and we left it at that.

You attend your child's graduation ceremony shell-shocked at the speed of your own transformation from tanned student to grey-haired parent. You try your best to be urbane but believe me, it's impossible to avoid drawing comparisons with how things were in your day. You realise with a chill that thirty years have passed and you have no idea which restaurant to choose for lunch.

Put off, perhaps, by all those Christmas babies, our daughter never considered following Dad into the labour ward. She got hooked on psychiatry as a student (partly because of an enjoyable elective at Groote Schuur) and is practising that craft somewhere in London as I write. I'm getting used to her being a member of somebody else's Royal College. After a lifetime in obstetrics and gynaecology I know nothing about other specialties, so her job is as mysterious to me as my son's. I do know, however, that she goes to work on a medium-sized motor bike, looking good in her leathers.

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