

## Improving the standard of medical practice

**JOHN ELLARD** AM, RFD, FRACP, FRANZCP, FRCPsych, MAPsS

In recent years the regulatory authorities and the Royal Colleges have been paying more attention to the maintenance of practice standards in the medical profession. This is as it should be. If commercial pilots were incompetent or impaired, disasters could occur, so there are procedures in place to ensure that appropriate standards are met. Obviously, the same should apply to the medical profession.

The principle is sound but the problem is in achieving the desired outcome. For example, common observation shows that it is possible to dream one's way through an educational lecture, and there are those who take part in peer review meetings without gaining apparent benefit.

Consider, for example, the Canadian study in which five dyscompetent physicians participated in 'a polyvalent, intensive, prolonged' remedial educational program that lasted three years and consisted of 'individualised review, ongoing small group and evidence-based discussions, simulated patients and role playing, formal chart review and peer review'. Few existing CME programs approach this level of intensity. At the end of the program, one physician had improved, one remained the same, and three deteriorated!

### Methods of motivation Some history

Are there methods that might involve the individual members of the profession more firmly than does standard CME? I thought it worth researching the history of regulatory bodies and their attempts to achieve performance in accord with their standards. Since organised medicine is but a recent phenomenon, I turned to the history of the church, the military and – perhaps more appropriately – educational authorities.

The more extreme methods are not relevant to our purpose. The church and the law used burning alive as a motivating practice, the church until the 17th century and the law of England as recently as 1783.<sup>2</sup> The military used the firing squad; I believe that

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'The beautiful Madame Lapuchin. Knouted by order of Elizabeth, Empress of Russia.' (The frontispiece of *A history of the rod*, by the Reverend William Cooper.)

its last use in English-speaking countries was in the First World War. It will be recognised that those subject to these corrections did not return to their duties and that the question of future improvement cannot be considered in their cases.

The technique used most often to improve performance has been that of flogging. In education, the use of the rod as a means of correction and motivation has been recorded constantly for more than 2000 years. It was reported, perhaps apocryphally, that Homer was whipped by his schoolmaster Toilus, and Horace called his schoolmaster 'the flogging Orbilius'. Plutarch, on the other hand, in his treatise on education, argued that punishments of this kind produced 'torpor of the mind and disregard for exertion, from a recollection of the pain and insult of the infliction endured'.<sup>3</sup>

Flogging was also of benefit associated with holiness. St Theresa of the Barefoot Carmelites used flagellation to pro-

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Dr Ellard is a Consultant Psychiatrist in Sydney, NSW.

mote godly ways,<sup>4</sup> and the founder of the Dominicans, the Spaniard Dominic de Gumian, was said to have scourged himself until he became unconscious and had to be revived by the care and caresses of the Holy Mother and three beautiful Sisters.<sup>5</sup> His penance improved others as well as himself, and it is recorded that the air was filled with the howlings of evil spirits, thwarted by the rescue of thousands of souls. This is an interesting outcome measure but I doubt that we shall be able to apply it to our profession.

More recently the great public schools of England made much use of flogging. Not only did flogging concentrate the minds of those subjected to it, but there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that later their sexual lives became more complex and picturesque as a consequence.

It is widely known that the same procedures were used in schools for young ladies. A mid-19th century correspondence in the London *Family Herald* and a similar correspondence in *Queen, the Ladies' Newspaper and Court Chronicle* would suggest that while flogging young ladies produced some benefits, occasionally it strayed into prurience.<sup>6</sup>

There is reason for caution here. A century ago there were indications that punishment, therapy and sexuality were becoming confounded – as evidenced by the opening of such establishments as ‘the Balneopathic Institution for the treatment of rheumatism, gout, sciatica and neuralgia by hot air baths, massage and discipline, etc’ at 120 Marylebone Road, London. Fortunately for the morality of the nation, the law took the matter seriously and second or subsequent convictions for conducting such establishments earned the offender a whipping.<sup>7</sup>

### Preferred methods

Before committing oneself to flogging as the preferred method, one must consider other traditional forms of motivation. Since the British system of justice is renowned for protecting the weak and for its mercy, I turned my attention in that direction. Some procedures, such as being torn apart by horses or boiled alive, may be put aside on the basis that they were intended to improve those observing rather than the sufferers. Furthermore, they would be expensive to implement and the necessary expertise and resources would be difficult to assemble. Other techniques, such as being stretched on a rack or subjected to certain manipulations involving the use of large red-hot pincers and molten lead, although well established in the literature, I would discard because they were labour-intensive or because, in some cases, they were inclined to pollute the environment.

Flogging, however, requires little apparatus and only a modest amount of skill. It is a procedure deeply embedded in British educational and military tradition, and was used in the New South Wales prison system until quite recently.

### The technique

The particular method of flogging requires further thought. The Romans, for example, suspended the person to be flogged from a beam by his hands, naked, with a heavy weight tied to his feet to prevent him from kicking the virgator, whose office it was to perform the operation. Roman ladies preferred to suspend their female slaves by the hair.<sup>8</sup>

Elizabeth, Empress of Russia, had the beautiful Madam Lapuchin knouted while firmly attached to the back of a retainer.<sup>9</sup> In the Royal Navy the person to be flogged was tied to a grating while the British Army made use of a triangle. As flogging in peacetime in the military was abolished in 1867, no precedent is to be found in the Royal Air Forces. The triangle would seem to be the preferable apparatus if flogging is to be introduced into maintenance of professional standards programs.

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The number of strokes to be administered is a matter of judgment, there being no satisfactory scientific literature on this topic. The largest number I could find laid down for an individual was 1900, for an insubordinate soldier at Dinapulu, India.<sup>10</sup> However, Sir Edward Paget weakly remitted 750 of them, so we do not know what their effect would have been had they been administered. I decided to follow the authority of the Reverend William Cooper, author of *A history of the rod*, and stipulate a duration rather than the number. Even though the Reverend Cooper regarded the brevity of the discipline as degenerate, I would accept his recommendation of the time taken to sing the ‘Miserere,’ ‘De Profundis’ and the ‘Salve Regina’, in slow time, the ‘Miserere’ being the 51st Psalm and the ‘De Profundis’, the 130th Psalm, as the appropriate duration.<sup>11</sup>

Choosing the appropriate instrument of flagellation is a difficult task. I visited what I understood to be a museum conducted by a group of ladies in Sydney’s western suburbs. The name of their organisation – The Sisters Without Mercy – suggested that they had religious affiliations but inquiries of the major denominations did not confirm this. I knew that I had come to the right place because in the waiting room I saw and recognised some senior members of a number of professions. Inspection of the premises revealed not only a dungeon with

## Consultant's comment

Dr John Ellard confronts the problem of how the medical profession should deal with dysfunctional practitioners. He uses the style and technique pioneered by Dean Swift in his proposals for solving a perceived overproduction of babies in 18th century Ireland. This approach challenges us to face problems we all recognise, but which we tend to disregard, leaving key analyses and solution production to others. We baulk at the complexities inherent in these situations. Alas, we either change our stance, or others from within the community generally will take decisions independently of us. We would be wise to listen, consider, and then act as cooperative members of our rapidly changing society.

Professor Sir John Scott KBE  
 Professor (Emeritus) of Medicine  
 University of Auckland  
 New Zealand

apparatus relevant to the subject of this essay but also a school-room and a doctor's surgery, suggesting a pleasing interest in related history and practices.

The ladies had a fine array of whips and similar instruments, carefully and expertly maintained. One could have been forgiven for believing that they had been used but yesterday. Equally striking was the sense of history: the virga, scutica, ferula and flagellum of Roman times were all there, as were a cat-o'-nine-tails and a common riding whip. There was also a Russian plét – a very fine specimen. I wondered if it were a replica of the knout used on the beautiful Madam Lapuchin but the Sisters seemed to have little knowledge of history and looked at me in a peculiar way when I asked them.

There is also the question of who should do the flogging. The range of precedents is wide. The Devil flagellated the early saints, particularly St Anthony, but I believe his services are better avoided. In any case his judgement was capricious, for on occasion he ordered beatings of the sinful. Thus he directed that a man be beaten for stealing four candles from St Virgil's altar. Other flagellations were divinely inspired. The Reverend Cooper cites Bernadinus de Bustis' description of the flagellation of a professor of theology that was inspired by, and pleasing to, the Virgin Mary!<sup>12</sup>

This may perhaps dispose of the argument that flogging is too demeaning a procedure to be used in the medical profession. One should also remember that both Henry II of England and Henri IV of France were flagellated for their improvement, the latter to be beaten by the Pope, to the singing of the

*Miserere*. It must be admitted that Henri IV took refuge in two proxies: Messrs D'Ossat and du Perron, both of whom later became cardinals.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

There can be no more necessary and noble calling than that of medicine and yet after millennia there remain deep divisions of opinion about how best practice is to be achieved. This is as much a concern for the student as for the educator, for the individual as for the general population. Only too often dogma has overthrown reason, and great changes have been made without a proper basis in research.

I hope that in writing these few words those with more resources and more disciplined minds than I have will be able to devise a proper research protocol, with sound outcome measures, to take this proposal further.

There is one further point to be made. It has been observed in the past that whipping has a curative effect on fever, lockjaw, smallpox and bowel problems.<sup>14</sup> These observations have never been tested by strict research procedures. If my proposal is accepted, then in due course long term observations on the health of doctors may produce significant benefits for all of us. **MT**

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