

# Q

## Questions

**The enduring fascination of general practice, as with life, is that you never know quite what will turn up next.**

### ***'CAN YOU GET SALMONELLA FROM DOGS?'***

Mr Parrish, a small man who was wearing a slightly crumpled suit and tie, was accompanied by his rather larger wife. She sailed into the consulting room ahead of him, like a schooner under full sail.

"Sit down," she said.

He did.

"No, not there. That's my chair."

Mr Parrish removed himself from the reasonably comfortable chair alongside my desk and took his place on one of two, smaller and rather less comfortable chairs which were in the corner of the consulting room.

His wife arranged herself in the bigger chair.

"He thinks he's got salmonella," she said. "I've told him it's just diarrhoea, but he says it's salmonella."

She shook her head slowly as if to indicate that it was her very great misfortune to be married to a complete idiot.

I addressed Mr Parrish.

“Perhaps you’d like to tell me about your symptoms?” I said. “How long have you had the diarrhoea.”

I sat back, intending to indicate to him that I had plenty of time and that he needn’t rush.

It was a mistake. His wife jumped into the silence.

“It’s not like normal diarrhoea,” she said. “It’s more like rabbit droppings.”

For a brief moment a surreal image of Mr and Mrs Parrish jointly inspecting his bowel movements flashed into my mind but it was too unpleasant to retain. I lifted my hand to stop her in case further details were about to emerge.

“I think it might be better if you let your husband speak for himself. They are, after all, his motions.”

Mrs Parrish turned towards her husband. “Go on then. Tell him.”

If looks could have killed the poor man would never have uttered another word. He would have been struck dead instantly.

“It’s the dogs next door,” he said, mercifully still being capable of speech. “They’ve both got diarrhoea. Someone told me salmonella’s airborne, so they must’ve given it to me.”

“How often are you having your bowels opened?”

“Two or three times a day.” He looked at his wife. “Mrs Parrish is right. It is a bit like rabbit droppings. But sometimes it’s more like sheep’s. You know. Little round balls. About the size of Maltesers.”

“Most of them aren’t as big as Maltesers.” It was Mrs Parrish again. “They’re not quite the same colour either. They’re darker.”

“What are? The droppings? Or Maltesers?”

I almost immediately regretted the question.

“No. Don’t tell me,” I said. “I don’t need to know.”

A vivid image had popped into my mind and I was suddenly unsure whether I would ever again be able to enjoy what had always been one of my favourite chocolate treats.

Mrs Parrish ignored my plea.

“The droppings,” she said. “They’re darker.”

For no good reason I found myself trying to recall the exact colour of a Malteser. It wasn’t helpful.

“And he gets terrible wind.”

I looked at her husband. “Is that right?”

“Oh yes. Sometimes I think I need to go and it’s just wind.” He began to undo his suit jacket. “It makes me swell up. See.”

Jacket now open, he stood up and thrust his stomach towards me.

“Right,” I said, briskly, taking advantage of his change of position to move the consultation forwards. “I think I’d better take a look at you. Hop up on the couch.”

I stood up and moved towards the examination couch. Mr Parrish followed me and levered himself up onto the disposable paper sheet which protected the fake-leather surface.

“If you’d like to undo the top of your trousers,” I continued, “I’ll have a little feel of your abdomen and see what’s going on.”

While examining him I asked about potentially significant symptoms.

“Any bleeding from the back passage? Any vomiting? Have you noticed any lumps?”

He answered in the negative.

The abdominal examination, as expected, was entirely normal. It had to be carried out though, for it is an unfortunate truth that no one is immortal. Even the most anxious, unhappy and hypochondriacal of patients will one day shuffle off to meet their Maker.

Dr Geoff Cove would, at this stage, almost certainly have gloved himself up and inserted at least one finger into Mr Parrish’s rear passage. And probably the large proctoscope as well.

I resisted the temptation. Being married to Mrs Parrish was punishment enough for the poor man.

“I can’t find anything to get worried about,” I said. “Stick to a light diet for the next few days. If things don’t settle down you can bring in a stool sample and I’ll send it off for testing at the hospital.”

“So I haven’t got salmonella from the dogs?”

“I think it’s unlikely,” I said. “Salmonella isn’t typically airborne. It’s usually spread by direct contact. And you don’t even know for sure that the dogs have got salmonella.”

It was time to bring the consultation to a close.

“If you’d like to get yourself dressed I’ll prescribe something that should help with your bowels.”

Mr Parrish got up from the couch and began to fasten his trousers. I sat down at my desk to write a few notes in his file.

As I did so, Mrs Parrish spoke. “I told ‘im he wouldn’t be likely to get salmonella from the dogs.”

She turned to her husband.

"I told you that yesterday, didn't I? The only way you'll get salmonella from a dog is if you haven't cooked it properly."

She cackled to herself. It was a joke.

I looked at Mr Parrish who had successfully buttoned up his trousers. He appeared, however, to be struggling with his jacket. He had pushed his left arm into the right sleeve and, like a small child, he was concentrating hard on trying to rectify the situation.

He seemed not to have heard his wife's comment.

I found myself wondering what kept the two of them together. I couldn't come up with any sensible answer.

Seen from the outside, Mr and Mrs Parrish's marriage was one of life's many mysteries.

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### ***'DO YOU THINK YOU COULD YOU FILL OUT THIS FORM FOR ME?'***

Mrs Flaherty was rummaging through assorted packages and papers which almost filled the huge canvas bag she had dragged into the room behind her. She was a big woman and despite it being a warm day she was wearing a heavy, dark-blue coat. She was sweating profusely as she continued her search.

"I definitely put it in here yesterday. Ah, yes. Got it."

A large, brown envelope was produced from the bag. She extracted a booklet from the envelope and thrust it towards me.

"Page Six," she said. "It's for my husband. We're claiming Disability Allowance. The Social said to get it filled in by his doctor."

I turned to Page Six.

It was headed *'To be completed by the person who knows you best. Please ask this person to state the ways in which your disability affect you in the activities of daily living.'*

As he was one of our regulars I had to admit that I did know Mr Flaherty quite well. But I surely couldn't be the person who knew him best.

I point at the heading.

"It says here this has to be filled in by the person who knows him best. Someone who lives with him is probably the best person to say how he is affected by his disability."

I looked at Mrs Flaherty, whose face was now visibly damp, and tried to give the impression that I had been struck by a brilliant idea.

“Perhaps you could fill it in?”

“Me?” She shook her head and a shower of moisture cascaded onto the shoulders of her coat. “Oh no. I don’t think so. I wouldn’t know what to say. I’m not a doctor.”

“All they want is some idea of what sort of things your husband can’t do. Surely you must be able to think of something.”

Mrs Flaherty thought for moment.

“Well he’s no bloody use in bed for a start.”

“Perfect!” I said enthusiastically. “Put it down.”

“Not that I mind of course. You don’t really want to be bothered at my age. It’s a bit of a relief to be honest.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “I know exactly what you mean. But keep your own feelings about it quiet. Or they might think it’s more of a benefit than a disability.”

Mrs Flaherty looked thoughtful as I closed the booklet and slid it back into the envelope before handing it back to her.

“He used to be quite good. It’s definitely a disability now.”

“I’m sure it is,” I said, ushering her gently towards the door. “Just put everything you can think of on the form. Everything. Get the family to help. Any disabilities at all. The more the merrier.”