

## A visit to the Doctor by Mary Aspinwall

I first met Stephen Gascoigne and his wife Hilary six years ago, when they invited me for afternoon tea. They and their huge black cat Jigme were newly arrived in Ireland and I was plotting our family's escape here from London. From the time we arrived they were great friends and now they are also neighbours, recently having bought a beautiful old rectory and coach house just down the road from us. Stephen practices from the coach house. It has two treatment rooms, a herb preparation area and a lovely welcoming reception with a wood-burning stove.

Over the past few months Stephen has been revising his large blue "Bible" for Alternative Practitioners and I have edited it, adding homeopathic cases. The new edition is due out in March (under the new name "The Clinical Medicine Guide – An Holistic Perspective") and so Lelia Doolan asked if I would do an interview with the good doctor. It felt strange interviewing someone that I know well and I half-expected to know all the answers...but I am happy to report he is still able to surprise me.

### **Why did you choose to come and live in Ireland?**

I came here to have a quiet life because I was living in London. I'd just finished training in herbal medicine and I was looking around for somewhere pleasant and rural to live where I could garden half the week and see patients a couple of days a week. We looked at France and Ireland, but decided on Ireland because we'd been here on holiday and loved the place.

### **... and what became of the gardening?**

I found that...well, I made a decision that...because of the number of people that wanted treatment that I'd concentrate on that and the semi-retirement option isn't happening at the moment (laughs).

### **How do you find working here differs from Britain?**

In many ways its actually quite similar particularly the last four or five years, where things in Ireland have speeded up and people are busy, they have a lot of responsibilities and financial pressures ...

Still, there is something different about treating people in Ireland because no matter how busy and frantic peoples' lives are they are still, fortunately, fundamentally more stable. This is a massive generalisation, but I do feel people respond to treatment quicker than in London. That might be an urban/rural split.

I do find people in Ireland much more open to alternative medicine, both as an idea and a practical solution. Part of the reason for that is that here people have to pay for healthcare, whereas in England people think it's free because they don't have to pay at the point of delivery, so a lot of people see alternative medicine as a luxury.

Conventional prescriptions are also subsidised in England so they cost about £5, but I saw a patient yesterday who has ulcerative colitis. Her prescription here costs £48 and she's been told she'll be on it for life. That is a powerful incentive to consider alternative medicine. Culturally I think people here are more open, less dislocated from their past and haven't lost contact with traditional herbal and folk medicine and although I'm practising Traditional Chinese Medicine they understand the essence of it. They know it works.

### **... to go into your dark past when you were a GP...**

How did you know it was dark ... who have you been talking to?

### **I read the Foreword of your book ... I wondered what the experience of being a GP was like...**

It was interesting (laughs). I mean I think I'm busy *now* seeing 50 –60 patients a week, but I used to see 250 people a week not counting on-call duty ... it was just incredibly hard work. I hardly had time to see people; I'd see them for five minutes... so I found it very frustrating. It was a great opportunity to see people as people, rather than as in hospitals where they are isolated from their homes and families, you're seeing them in realistic situations. The frustration of general practice is the methods you use just don't work or they actually make people ill. I found I was surviving on trying to give sympathy to people. It was only when I

was talking to patients about their experience with acupuncturists, osteopaths and homeopaths that I recognised one could actually get help from healthcare practitioners.

**...so when you say you relied mostly on sympathy, do you mean you were reluctant to prescribe any medication?**

Well increasingly so, in fact, at the end, because I worked in general practice for three and a half years, I got to the point where I could not actually write a prescription, because I felt it was damaging people. I mean to begin with I was losing faith in it, but eventually it was more than that, I felt I was causing more problems than I was solving. If you are a GP who can't write a prescription there's not much use for you (laughs). I was somewhat redundant.

**You're days were numbered...**

My days were numbered (laughs). I was in a practice where there were six of us and I think my five partners heaved a huge sigh of relief (laughs) when I left. That tension in the practice must have been quite something ... certainly it was for me, but also for them.

**Did any of them ever question what they were doing?**

Not that they ever discussed with me. They would often question what I was doing (laughs).

**I can imagine...In terms of your work now what do you see as the advantages of having trained as a doctor?**

Well one thing is that people have more faith in you, whether that's realistic or not is another matter, but they do come with that degree of trust. The downside of that is they expect you're going to 'fix' them, like doctors are supposed to 'fix' people.

**Do you mean the 'quick fix' idea?**

Yes, please give me a pill doctor 'cause it'll make me better. Please give me some herbs doctor 'cause it'll make me better. What I try to do is to encourage people to support themselves, make changes themselves, because that's where improvements in health come from.

I suppose the main benefit (of my training) is I've actually seen conventional medicine in action and I just do not believe that it works. As Westerners we all emotionally feel on some level that conventional medicine does the business, this is what we are brought up to believe... but actually when I check it out from my own experience in hospitals and general practice I've seen it doesn't work.

That's not to say it's not sometimes necessary for life-threatening situations, but those numbers of situations are actually extremely limited. So I have no problems with offering something else to people because I know conventional medicine isn't going to do the trick anyway ...

And the other thing is I've seen very serious illnesses and whilst I do get worried about people ...but I've also seen it before, often, so that experience does give me a certain confidence, knowing what is OK and what isn't. Whereas if you don't have that experience you worry if things are OK or not and worry about how sick the patient actually is.

**Apart from the 'doctor fix me' problem do you see any other disadvantages to having had a background in conventional medicine?**

I think it's difficult at the beginning when you're trying to learn a different way of looking at people and ill health. Speaking to other doctors who've "turned", as it were, I think we all have the same difficulty ...how do you actually look at things, what model do you use? What most of us do is to try and put the new way (be it Chinese medicine or Homeopathy) on top of what you know already, which most people, myself included, realise that you can't do. It is actually one or the other. You can't mix these things, so if you put your conventional training on one side and just concentrate on alternative medicine it actually works quite well...Whereas when you try and mix the two or sit on the fence ... a lot of medical practitioners try to keep a foot in both camps ...well I tried to do that for a while and I know, personally, it was a very uncomfortable position to be in. You have to do one or the other.

**So how would you react to the term ‘complementary medicine’?**

I think it's a term used to placate conventional practitioners who feel threatened by alternative approaches like Homeopathy and Chinese medicine that do help people.

**On the subject of having a foot in both camps, when it comes to issues such as immunisation, how would you deal with enquiries like that from your clients?**

What I try to do is give people information so that they can decide for themselves, which generally means I recommend a book like “Dispelling Vaccination Myths” by Alan Phillips or I give them print outs from my book and give them the opportunity to discuss it with me. What I generally find is that if someone asks me about something, then already they have a lot of doubts about it. By pointing them in the direction of alternative information it gives them the background on which to base an informed consent. When I was in general practice I never had access to this kind of information and the issue of immunisation was never even discussed.

**Are there other issues where you feel people need access to information to enable them to make a more informed choice?**

Many subjects: Cancer; Women's health; Childbirth; Pregnancy; Children's health... On all sorts of issues people need access to a wider source of information than just the conventional view. In the West, most people only think about their health when they're ill and it's a bit like thinking of death when we're dying ...in some respects it is a little too late. Say a mother comes to see you whose child has had problems with a vaccination... to then to talk about vaccination, it's a little too late. People don't ask those questions first. I think that is a big cultural problem that we're trying to get over.

On the one hand we want to treat people when they're sick, but on the other we want to try and encourage people to be healthy. The question is how to get to people early enough so that they are already aware of those issues and debating those issues is a challenge, because a lot of people just don't want to know.

When people first come what they want is to get rid of their symptoms, whereas the process of healing is very much about bringing awareness into the situation. Why has it come? Why am I in this situation? What can I do to change the situation? That is a long and involved process to reach that point of awareness and to begin with people don't want to know about causes of conditions...”just make me better please”. It's a big challenge for our professions, both Chinese medicine and Homeopathy.

**In your book the “Chinese Way to Health” you do cover what Chinese medicine has to say on the subject of preventative healthcare...**

Yes, exactly, the Chinese say there are eight methods of attaining health Acupuncture and Herbs are the last two resorts. People need to incorporate the other six methods: meditation, diet, exercise, astrology, Feng Shui and massage into their lives and if you live according to those principles, in harmony with Nature, the environment and the climate you tend to be healthy, if you then become ill you use acupuncture and herbs. Of course in the West that's the first thing people use or come for, so we're doing things back-to-front.

**I read in one of your books that the Chinese would pay their doctors for as long as they were well and only stop paying them when they became ill...**

Yes, the investment is in health not in disease. The Chinese say to seek treatment when you are ill is like digging a well when you are thirsty ...it's a little too late. So as we treat people we need to also bring up that basic level of education.

**To change subject a little, you're a practising Buddhist ...**

(laughs) Well...I'm a Buddhist.

**Sometimes practising, so...can you tell us how that has helped you either personally or professionally?**

Well it *has* helped me, tremendously...it's actually very difficult to put into words.

**It's a big question, may be I could narrow it. In your day-to-day practice is your experience of the Teachings of Buddhism helpful when you are working on cases?**

One of the most important things I've got from it is an attitude, a way of looking at things. In the Teachings they talk about motivation being all and when I was in China training in acupuncture I asked the doctor there what advice he could give me to be more effective in helping people. He said the most important thing is to treat patients as if they were members of your own family, which in the West sometimes produces a reaction because in a family where we have difficulties... (laughs) but I know what he *meant* was that quality of care that we bring to close relationships needs to be brought to your care of patients then whatever you do will tend to have a good outcome.

Also on the subject of attitude, very often what we see seems very real. If we see someone suffering we very much identify with their suffering and pain, whereas Buddhist teachings show that we are more than just this present situation, there is a part of us that is beyond this suffering, which I find quite hopeful.

In my work I try to encourage people to disconnect somewhat from their pain and not identify with it too much or take it too seriously and this can create tremendous freedom. You see that in people who have had curative treatment they might come back for a follow-up with the same symptom, but they are somehow much more relaxed. There is a space in their mind, although the original physical symptom might not have changed at all and they have more energy, something has shifted. Hopefully the physical symptom will improve too, but there is this awareness that how you look at the symptom has a bearing too.

Another teaching that comes to mind is on the preciousness of this life, but the teachings are so vast...

In terms of practice Buddhism uses meditation to calm the mind and awareness practice to develop a contemplative attitude. The more grounded and present we are (as practitioners) the less distracted we are and the more able to give our full attention. It also helps us to avoid burnout.

Frank Ostazeski who runs a Zen hospice in the US very much encourages his carers to have some sort of contemplative practice (yoga, Tai Chi, meditation). He won't take anyone on his training course unless they have already established some sort of practice for at least three or four months. That's the basis. Traditionally in China there was not a separation between doctor and priest, that is very much a Western idea. Body, mind and spirit are all inter-connected so unless you have the basis of some sort of contemplative practice, or in my case an aspiration to some form of contemplative practice (laughs), it's very difficult to have a basic ground from which to work. The Mind is being distracted so much anyway, when you see people who are ill this can be just another source of distraction. It won't solve all ills, but it's definitely very nourishing to have some form of practice.

**You mentioned 'burn out'. Are there any particular kinds of cases that you find most difficult, which lead you to feel more stressed or 'burnt out'?**

I think it's where there are a lot of mental and emotional issues ...

No, actually, I'll tell you what's the most tiring ... it's when I try to get the patient to follow my agenda or to slot into whatever I've decided they should do. Say someone comes, who is in a personal or work situation that they are finding very difficult and I have a certain idea of how that could be resolved... that's what causes problems, because as soon as I think I have the means to resolve something, then I am completely out of touch with the patient. My intention or rather my presence is distracted by the conceptual idea of what should and shouldn't happen. That's why the practice of meditation is helpful, because it's about trying not to manipulate things, letting the Mind sit, be quiet and find its own place.

**Do you see parallels between that and Hahnemann's 'unprejudiced observer'?**

Absolutely, yes... so generally the two things we need to give people, and ourselves, are time and attention. If we can't give ourselves that time and attention, through contemplative practice, how on earth can we give it to others? The more we can be that unprejudiced observer the more healing will occur in that space.

**I think some people might be surprised to know that you trained as a Homeopath for a couple of years...**

I did, yes, I did a couple of years to The Northern College of Homeopathy in England in the early Eighties, just before I went to China. Eventually I chose to study Chinese medicine because I felt I had a much closer connection with Eastern philosophies.

**Was there anything that you took from your homeopathic training that you find useful?**

I found the homeopathic training very helpful. I started it six months before I left General practice.

**Ah ...was that why it got harder and harder to write prescriptions?**

I think so. I'd done the weekends at the London Homeopathic Hospital and realised that there was a little bit more to Homeopathy than they'd talk about. I wanted to explore the possibilities of it as a system of healing.

**Can you remember what most struck you in those first six months of training?**

It was a lecture by Michael Thomson on Apis. For an hour he just talked about the behaviour of the honey bee. I never took any notes ... I was just completely spellbound. It was an account of how bees lived, related to the remedy. The other thing was the philosophy, particularly the accounts given by Kent.

**I notice in your book you refer to Hering's Observations on Direction of Cure...**

Yes, similar observations are there to be found in Chinese medicine, but it's not stated explicitly and so a lot of Chinese medicine practitioners aren't aware of it. It's so astoundingly simple, yet profound. It states everything very clearly in about three or four lines. It's a description of healing, whatever the means. The flip-side is, if you connect it with what normally happens in (conventional) treatment it is shocking. Once you become aware of those things there is no way you can write prescriptions.

**Do you see Chinese medicine and Homeopathy as being able to work together in a particular case?**

Absolutely. I find the two work very well together...my feeling is that they work on different levels in that Homeopathy has this ability to shift patterns at a very deep level. However, because it is so deep it can rake up a lot of stuff. That's not to say that Chinese medicine doesn't do that. Who the hell knows what levels these things work? Every therapist tends to think their therapy works on a deeper level, but actually it doesn't matter if it's deep or superficial the important thing is, is it appropriate? I do find that because Chinese medicine and Homeopathy work on different levels they do very much complement each other. The only difficulty some homeopaths have, if I'm treating the same patient with herbs, is can they read the case. If it's OK with the homeopath I find that people generally get better quicker using both. The application of a well-selected remedy with Chinese herbs I find unstoppable...

**Killer bee! (laughs)**

African Apis (laughs). Also I find that some people might go and see the homeopath and they might have a few remedies, but the picture's not clear and the remedies don't seem to work. Then they come and see me for a while then go back to the homeopath and the same remedy or a different remedy is prescribed and the case just flows... and vice versa. They come and see me treatment doesn't work very well and then when they come back, from the homeopath there is a definite change.

**Something needs to shift first...**

Yeah.

**Just getting to the plug bit now, which is to say that your book, with its rather groovy new cover, is about to be launched on the unsuspecting practitioners out there and one of the questions that comes to my mind is, the original version came out in 1993, why did you feel the need to bring out this new edition?**

Mainly to bring it up-to-date because in eight years there have been a few changes with treatments so I wanted it to be current and it was also an opportunity to proof read it (laughs). I've added more case histories, including cases treated by homeopathy as well. The whole book has been edited, professionally typeset and indexed. It's a much more polished production, this time. The study guide has also been revised to match the new content. The first time I did most things myself. I'm still publishing it myself, because I can't get anyone to publish it, basically.

**Is that because it serves a niche market with small potential sales or because it's contentious?**

Well I tend to think it's because it's contentious, but that might just be my argumentative side coming out. One publisher told me they didn't want it because there was already a book like it on the market, but I don't think there is. One of the problems is it's not conventional and it's not alternative, so it's difficult to categorise...although it may be easier to categorise now that it has been re-titled. I mean what I'm trying to do with the book now is to broaden it's appeal so that it's something maybe nurses will read and the general public might read if they were interested in getting hard information about conditions with an holistic slant.

**You mention on the cover [www.drgascoigne.com](http://www.drgascoigne.com) what's that about?**

The idea of the website, at the moment, is to offer information for practitioners, such as homeopaths and acupuncturists. It will offer a support and supervision service. It will offer back-up for the book and study guide. People will be able to ask questions about what they are studying.

What I've always tried to do through teaching pathology and writing the book was to support people in their practice so they can treat lots of patients and treat serious cases.

**Do you have anything else in the pipeline?**

Yes "The Prescribed Drugs Guide" will be out in the summer and there'll also be information on the website relating to prescribed drugs. What they are, what the side effects are and how to get people off them safely and appropriately.

Later there will be information sheets on there for practitioners to download to give to patients about diet, immunisation, exercise, childbirth etc.

Eventually what I'd like is for the website to also be a source of information to the general public. If you look at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) (a search engine) it says something like 1,310,000,000,000 checked ... now out of those what is any good? Nobody knows. I'm very keen on offering a website that is a resource that filters information,

Say for example, someone's uncle gets cancer they'll get information from the hospital, but where else are they going to get information on what treatment is available? So the website will have general information on cancer and then ways in which alternative medicine can help in the treatment of cancer and where to get more information on getting help.

Maybe that is what comes from having been a GP in the frontline. Where do people go for information ...usually it's their GP. The GP is obviously very much in the groove of conventional medicine. There is very much a need for looking at all sorts of other information.

What I'd like to do is write books for the general public, following on from "The Chinese Way to Health" I want to write books about say asthma or cancer with insights from Chinese medicine to help people examine what caused their symptoms. They will be very much self-help books and they will also raise awareness that there are other approaches to treatment.

**So really this is the other side of the coin. Most of the work you have done up to now has been in supporting alternative practitioners to take on more work and treat a greater variety of conditions. In the future you'll be encouraging the public to take a look at the option of being treated by one of them.**

Yes. I want to see holistic or alternative medicine become mainstream and I want people to go to alternative practitioners as their first port of call. What I'd like to see is in Clonakilty, for example, there are something like seven GPs ...I would like to see at least seven full-time alternative therapists in Clonakilty so that people can either go to their GP or to an alternative practitioner...whether they want treatment of cancer, the common cold, eczema or whatever it is. So people have a straight choice, much as they do in China.

Mary Aspinwall