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Adventitia

My only private patient

Foolishly I never did private practice. Foolishly because if you don't do private practice you are never going to see Elizabeth Schwarzkoff as a patient, or for that matter Madonna, and the money must come in handy—though when I started a consultant's salary was a living wage.

Almost 30 years ago a posh GP rang me up to say that he was sending me the 14 year old daughter of an American film producer—this on the advice of an American professor of paediatrics I had met in New York. The girl had been diagnosed in New York as having tuberculous glands of the neck and I was to continue her treatment with isoniazid alone. I didn't like the sound of that.

I found a rather sulky girl with bilateral cervical gland enlargement. The glands were quite large, up to about an inch in diameter, not tender, firm, and mobile. Not at all like tuberculous glands. What is more the girl's mother told me that the girl had started menstruating and that during the cycle the glands changed in size quite considerably; that didn't sound like tuberculosis either.

So I started by doing a tuberculin test (the New York diagnosis had been purely clinical—no investigations had been done). It was a Heaf test, the only one available in the chest clinic (a shop near Oxford Circus) and it is a very good test: it requires no skill, it is virtually painless, and, conveniently, it can be read at a week. The response was negative. So it wasn't tuberculosis (atypical mycobacteria as a cause of cervical adenitis had hardly been heard of in Britain at that time).

I rang the posh GP and told him that the girl

would have to have a biopsy. The posh GP said he would arrange it. I assumed that this was the usual thing in private practice. He sent her to a urologist! A week or two later the answer came back. It was follicular carcinoma of the thyroid, which apparently is well known to occur in teenage girls. It wasn't well known to me. It was the first I had heard of it and the last. So I rang the posh GP and told him the girl should be sent to Jack Piercy, the surgeon superintendent of New End Hospital in Hampstead. New End was the name of a famous thyroid clinic originally started by London County Council. It had had several great men on its staff—among them Cecil Joll, who wrote a massive surgical textbook on the thyroid; Geoffrey Keynes (the brother of Maynard, the economist), who was the world authority on William Blake, and also Raymond Greene (the brother of Graham, the writer), who had been an Everest climber. Jack Piercy was the greatest of the lot. Two days later the posh GP rang me to say that Sir Ronald Bodley Scott, physician to the Queen, had said that we couldn't do better. I was very chuffed.

Jack Piercy told me in his letter that he had treated 17 similar patients by total thyroidectomy and block dissection of neck and that they had all survived. This girl underwent a successful block dissection of the thyroid. Many years later I heard that she was well (taking thyroxine as replacement therapy, of course).

I sent the film producer a bill for £25, which he paid by return but with no word of thanks.

I thought, "I will never be as lucky as that again so I'd better not see any more private patients," and I never did.

PETER D B DAVIES