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## Adventitia

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### Asbestos on my desk

A chunk of asbestos ore used to sit on my desk. It came from the Lac d'Amiante Asbestos Company, Quebec, which I visited after an international symposium on asbestos in Montreal in 1982. The mining explosions we watched were, however, less dramatic than the heated discussions on whether any asbestos could be used safely. My subsequent editorial reminds me that I had naively hoped to hear new evidence on whether thresholds for carcinogenicity exist. But no new data on this central issue were reported, and the main interest lay in confrontations between scientists, government representatives, trade unionists, and industrialists.

I was invited to Montreal because of two review articles on asbestos in a series on pollution I wrote for the *BMJ*. My work there included writing articles and acting as correspondence editor. The latter also yielded fascinating controversies. Most memorable was the correspondence on the first large study, by Hirayama, linking passive smoking and lung cancer. Months after publication of the paper in 1981 I was mystified to receive letters about it that were addressed to me personally. They turned out to be part of a campaign run by the US Tobacco Institute and we felt obliged to reopen the correspondence, which finished with a reply by Hirayama. But it was difficult to be sure where the truth lay and I am happy to see that his conclusion has been confirmed by later studies – and that environmental tobacco smoke has been accepted as a carcinogen by various public bodies, including Britain's Independent Scientific Committee on Smoking and Health and the US Environmental Protection Agency.

The asbestos on my desk was the most tangible but by no means the only legacy of the subjects on which I have written for the *BMJ*, and I am lucky to have had such wonderful opportunities and the help of so many interesting people. The first two series (anonymous) were on road accidents and accident and emergency services. The former has been particularly fruitful in enabling me to be a member of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on

Transport Safety – an organisation that actually gets things done – and to write further articles; in 1987 I also did a report on accidents in general for a colloquium of the Royal Colleges. And happily my behaviour as a driver and a pedestrian has been lastingly influenced.

Then came the pollution series, which also included articles on noise (for which I carried a noise meter everywhere for a fortnight), ionising radiation, lead, air pollution, etc. Repeatedly I learnt the depressing lesson that proponents of the radical view, which I would start by sympathising with, were often not reliable in their handling of evidence. The principle of not exploiting or being careless with people is surely robust enough, and in any case the certainties generally provided plenty of ammunition.

I did the last series, on rehabilitation, while technical editor of *Thorax*, and I could not have combined the two without the support and encouragement of my husband. I visited many centres that did wonderful work for people with strokes and head injuries, heart problems, and mental illness, among others, and occasionally attended discussions and case conferences, or lay on the floor doing exercises or even helped – this most poignantly in an “exercise” group in a geriatric long stay ward, where the only woman who seemed to know what was going on begged me to visit them again. This series has since led me to many conferences and the chance to report on them.

Subjects I have visited more briefly include exercise and health, the arts in illness and disability, and terminal care. After a conference on this last in 1980 I wrote an editorial, “Give sorrow words,” that was one of the most useful things I have done because a consultant told me that he used my concluding quotation on a ward round with his students. The words, which had been quoted at the conference, are from *The House at Pooh Corner*: “Said Eeyore . . . ‘I make it 17 days come Friday since anybody spoke to me.’ . . . Said Rabbit . . . ‘I was here myself a week ago.’ ‘Not conversing,’ said Eeyore. ‘Not first one and then the other. You said “Hallo” and flashed past.’”

DAPHNE GLOAG