

Medical icons



James Drife

As I write, 6 000 gynaecologists are packing their bags to come to Cape Town. At the end of the FIGO Congress they will have many memories to take home, but for all of them an abiding image will be the looming presence of Table Mountain. Whether or not they ride the cableway, and even if the summit is cloud-capped all week, they will remember the sandstone crag that defines the city. People who live nearby forget the impact of such iconic sights. When I was a medical student in Edinburgh I was far too sophisticated to join the tourists visiting the local castle, though I had to admit that the rock on which it stood could look breathtaking in the rare Scottish sunshine.

Cape Town is unusual in having its major sight provided by nature and visible from everywhere, including the International Convention Centre. Other cities have to rely on man-made attractions that can be hard for conference delegates to find. In Cairo, for example, or San Francisco, you need a special excursion to see the pyramids or the Golden Gate Bridge. Some famous structures are locally controversial – Parisians have learned to live with Monsieur Eiffel's iron tower, but in Sydney they are still arguing about the cost of their opera house. Others make me uneasy. Rio de Janeiro's concrete Christ, a Catholic symbol, looks down on overpopulated favelas, and if I lived in Brussels I should prefer my home town's international image to be something other than a statue of a boy taking a pee in the street.

Every destination city needs a brand image, and so indeed does a large congress. The FIGO 2009 logo – Africa and a woman's face – is brilliant even if I can't understand the little orbiting dots on left-hand side. A public image is also cultivated by some professions, but not all. Military leaders throughout history have left us triumphal arches and statues of themselves. Today's sporting heroes and heroines become larger than life – and command high fees – thanks to action photos and merchandising. Politicians work hard at all this, and not just because votes matter. The less democratic the government, the bigger the leader's image. One former Soviet country has a huge motorised statue of its dictator, turning slowly to face the sun.

Doctors are much more modest. Individually we hesitate to push ourselves forward for fear of annoying our colleagues. *On the Shoulders of Giants* is a collection of biographies written by Tom Baskett (who happens to be Chair of the FIGO 2009 Scientific Programme Committee). Its title is a quotation from Sir Isaac Newton ('If I have seen farther, it is by standing on

the shoulders of giants'), which nicely sums up the collectiveness of science, including medicine. Not that non-medical scientists are overly burdened by humility. Think of Albert Einstein, who became the scientific icon of the last century, although I feel some of the credit should go to his barber.

The medical profession does seem genuinely modest, individually and collectively. This is not necessarily a good thing. We are less assertive than we should be. We fail, for example, to produce iconic buildings – unlike our friends the lawyers, whose temples of legislation are monuments to their self-confidence. In contrast, we don't like hospitals to be flashy. Too many marble columns will lead to complaints that the money should have gone on patient care. My local infirmary in England, originally an impressive Victorian building, has been internally divided down the years, with more rooms and floors being squeezed inside and brick huts being added outside. Virtuously thrifty perhaps, but working in uninspiring surroundings makes staff demoralised, erodes our professional image and makes us less effective in speaking out on behalf of our patients. More marble columns, say I.

Our modesty, actually, is false. We know just how important our work is, and we foolishly assume that other people do too, without being told. After years of talking to bureaucrats and politicians I now know that this is not how the system works. Politicians respect humble healers but do not fear them. Decision-makers need to be just a bit scared, and diseases of women do not frighten powerful men. Doctors, trained in evidence-based medicine, make the mistake of believing that facts alone are enough. We should follow the example of the traditional healers of South Africa, who dress to impress and to frighten the devils away.

The oldest icon in Western medicine is a stick with a snake around it. Carrying one of those would ensure the full attention of the committee in the Ministry of Health. And thinking of iconic doctors, my favourite is not Hippocrates, the benign Greek who in any case was not a single individual, but Avicenna, the Persian physician who flourished a thousand years ago. Proud, with aquiline features and a frown, he looks like someone not to be crossed. That's the medical icon for me.

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