

# The right prescription

To most student doctors in the UK, he's a hero but here at *Medical Student* Towers we see him more as a close personal friend. On the eve of his band's UK tour, we speak to Alan Fletcher aka Neighbours legend Dr Karl Kennedy.

Emma-Jane Smith & Ferras Alwan

CHILD health lecturers are hard work at the best of times and having your phone ring all the way through doesn't aid concentration. By the time the lecture break comes you want to throw the damn thing out the window but in between the list of junk messages left by various random people, one slightly surreal voicemail stood out: "Hi, this is Alan Fletcher, Dr Karl Kennedy in Neighbours. I'm looking for Ferras Alwan, *Medical Student Newspaper*, give me a call on....." Ringing the private mobile number left confirmed that it was indeed the man seen as an idol to so many medics agreeing to do an interview with our lil' ol' paper. It was sandwiched in between one for BBC Radio One and Talksport so we would have to do it in a cab but we didn't mind as it felt right to rank *MS* alongside such luminaries.

Hanging around in a dingy alleyway at Ealing Studios, we lie in wait to meet an actor considered by medics everywhere to be one of daytime television's brightest stars. Our charge emerges from the building in a flurry of suitcases and female hangers-on, greeting us on the way to a waiting black cab. After cheerfully agreeing to a quick

photo-call, Fletcher dives into the cab and we are bundled in right afterwards.

Our interviewee is understandably keen to talk about his band and their current UK tour, and we manage to keep a lid on our Neighbours questions long enough for him to get a word in, albeit edgewise. Fletcher ('Fletch' to his friends, Dr Karl to us) has heard our opener about the band's origins many times before, and is ready with a polished answer.

"A couple of years ago I was at a restaurant with my wife, and two guys, Tommy Rando and Chris Hawker, were playing there and I got up and sang some songs with them," he explains. "They suggested we should do some stuff together. I told them I can't really be a normal musician because I haven't got

enough time, but I do these nights with other Neighbours actors on Mondays - so maybe the band could play there." This sounds like quite a leap, but there's more. "It wasn't too long before we'd recorded an album and then we started touring the UK." So there you have it. From restaurant karaoke to recording artist in sixty seconds flat. It seems the timescale of Neighbours even extends to its actors' lives.

The non-Neighbours band members, for their part, are lifelong professional musicians. Tommy Rando - who, according to Fletcher is the owner of a voice that "has to be heard to be believed" - sports a catalogue of over 160 songs, whilst lead guitarist Chris Hawker also works with another group, Airway Lanes.

The name of the band, Waiting Room, strikes us mere medical beings as, well, medical, so in the name of the rag you're holding we had to pop the question.

"It is medical," Fletcher admits, "but the idea came from a famous actor's quote: 'I only remember the

waiting'. In television, we spend so much time sitting around doing nothing, that that's what actors always say. When someone pointed out that it was also quite medical, it was kind of a snap." And that's just what you see on the cover of the Waiting Room's debut album: a scene that can be interpreted either way.

With the specifics in the can, we move on to the group's music; more specifically, whether it's any good. Our editor leaps in, citing his friend's surprise that the Waiting Room was "actually very...good," causing sidekick EJ to erupt into peals of embarrassed laughter.

"That's true of almost everyone who goes!" grins Fletcher, clearly no stranger to curious Neighbours fans crowding his gigs. "A lot of people, particularly students, go because they want to see Dr Karl - they have no idea what the music's going to be like, it could be complete rubbish! But it's really gratifying that at the end of the gig, all they want to talk about is the music." So what sort of music do they play? It turns out to be an eclectic mixture of covers and original work. "Our set at the moment includes the Kaiser Chiefs, Franz Ferdinand, Oasis, and a bit of Bon Jovi, with a Queen tribute medley to finish the gig. Our own music is very rock-based, although the album's got a few ballads on as well. And I like to write quirky songs about student life -

growing up and all the

tragedies of drinking too much." With the band on their third successful UK tour, their mix of contemporary, timeless and original pop-rock has surely exhausted the mere novelty of their lead singer's household name and proven the band's far-reaching appeal.

Yet in Australia, the Waiting Room is less well-known than you might imagine.

"We only play in Melbourne," says our interviewee. "The internet sales of the album have been great, but the interest is primarily in this country." Not particularly bothered about record releases, the band live for their gigs. "We've got some music we wrote for this tour which we'll probably just give away for free on the internet, just to keep people interested in the gigs," muses Fletcher. When the band does grace its own country with a performance, it is joined by supporting act Batman Street, a group including Ben Nicholas, the actor who plays Stingray in Neighbours. This comes as no surprise: Neighbours actors are renowned for their ability to break into the musical arena. Kylie Minogue, Jason Donovan, Holly Valance and Delta Goodrem are all past examples of this phenomenon, and Fletcher is eager to tell us about the current talent.

"Natalie Bassingthwaite, who plays Izzy, is the lead singer of a band called Rogue Traders. Their album has been No. 2 in the Australian album charts for about 6 or 8 weeks and it's gone triple platinum - she's huge. Young Stephanie McIntosh, who plays Sky, is recording at

the moment, and I think she's making a reality TV programme about the making of her album. And I'd like to think that good old Dr Karl doesn't do too badly either!"

In the UK, the Waiting Room's gigs are primarily at Walkabout bars and university balls, with their first gig of the current tour having been at Hull University, where they played alongside the likes of Rachel Stevens and the Fun Lovin' Criminals. With the notorious student penchant for Neighbours, the Waiting Room has had no trouble lifting the roof with the fervour of its university audiences.

"I always have a great reception at Loughborough uni, and Sheffield is like a second home to me," enthuses Fletcher. "There are so many wonderful places in the UK to go; Cardiff I've always had a great response at, and Lancaster went off the other night because there are so many students in that town." In that case, what we want an answer to is this: why is there only one London date in the tour when so many of the UK's students are in the capital? Fletcher sympathises. "That's the frustration of it. I get a lot of letters asking why I'm not coming here or there, but the reality is that whilst my booking agent advertises the tours, it's Walkabout and the student unions who decide where the band gets to go."

Imperceptibly, we steer the conversation back towards our favourite TV programme. We inquire as to whether the Neighbours storyline earlier in the year, in which Karl's musi-



# Win!

We have five copies of *Medical Student* signed by Alan - to get your hands on a copy all you have to do is answer the following question: What is the name of Alan's band? You can find the answer on his website: <http://www.alanfletcher.net/>

Email your answer to [ferras@medical-student.co.uk](mailto:ferras@medical-student.co.uk) by the 30th July to win! The editor's decision is final.

cal performance in Gino's play went down a treat with the ladies, was at all based on previous experience. "No, that storyline was fantasy unfortunately," chuckles Fletcher. "Karl's music is rubbish, and that's part of the fun of it. Even now at gigs now people always ask me to play 'Free as a River'! I've never played it though - that can stay Karl's song!" So the Right Prescription never existed then? "No, they're not a real band and they never will be... I don't think, anyway!"

And so to Neighbours. Karl - I mean Alan - relates to us how he won the part of the good doctor.

"Grundy [the producers of Neighbours] rang me and asked me to audition for Neighbours. Little did I know that my close friend Jackie Woodburne had also auditioned for the role of Susan - and it wasn't until I was cast, that I knew that she was cast, which was the icing on the cake for me," he smiles.

Fletcher had played fleeting roles in The Young Doctors and Flying Doctors in the past, but Dr Karl was his first actual physician role. We wondered if he'd done some research into the part, at least initially - but it turns out he has a personal adviser, in the form of his GP next-door neighbour.

"My neighbour John is almost Karl summed up in one person. Any questions I have, I ask him what he thinks, and we make adjustments to scripts based on realistically how a GP might deal with a situation." A cheeky smile crosses our faces as we flash on the entertainingly warped 'realism' of Dr Karl's everyday actions. Fletcher reads our minds. "Bear in mind, of course, that when you're doing a drama, you often play things in a way that wouldn't necessarily happen exactly that way in real life. A bit of fudging has to go on." It certainly does - Dr Karl has broken or bent every rule in the proverbial book in his on-screen career, trampling over patient confidentiality and professional relationships alike. But Fletcher acknowledges this as part of the appeal of his character.

"He has no airs and graces. He'd like to think that he's terribly clever but he's got so many flaws! I think people relate to the fact that he's a flawed person."

In terms of actual medical actions, Karl's repertoire is somewhat limited by the constraints of the

show.

"We're not allowed to show needles," says Fletcher, "because a lot of young kids watch the show. They try to avoid anything that's going to freak anybody out. We don't show a lot of blood or anything like that." This presumably prevents Karl from performing brain surgery. Still, Dr Kennedy manages to dispense advice relating to almost every specialty; Boyd's mental illness, Alex's leukaemia, Summer's long QT syndrome, Steph's pregnancy and breast cancer and even Rachel's electric shock have all come under his jurisdiction. It worries even the most laid-back medical student to think of poor Dr Karl taking on so much, being as he is the only doctor in Erinsborough. "That's actually very beneficial for Karl," laughs our guest. "He makes an enormous amount of money through overtime!" But Fletcher does admit to Karl "supervising most of the medical emergencies that occur in Erinsborough. But that can be misinterpreted," he adds. "Just because he's popping his head into a patient's room doesn't mean he's necessarily administering all the treatment!" We continue to mercilessly tease our actor by quizzing him about Boyd's glittering medical future. After all, he got into medical school (un)surprisingly easily, and with the timescale of Neighbours, how long will it be before he's in practice with Karl? "He'll probably be fully qualified before you know it and I'll be working for him in about 9 months!" jokes Fletcher. "No, in all honesty, I think they'll be forced to treat Boyd's career a bit more seriously than that."

Moving away from Karl's medical existence, we finally blurt out the question we've been barely holding in since climbing into the black cab: what's in store for Karl? We make no secret of wanting him to get back with Susan.

**Have you ever wondered what the real Alan is like? Wonder no more!**

**What was the last CD you bought?**

It's called Little Cloud by The Whitlams, an Australian band, brilliant, brilliant CD.

**What music are you into?**

I'm into Franz Ferdinand, the Kaisers, the Arctic Monkeys, Green Day, Jet, that sort of thing. Basically I like rocking to strong music.

**Favourite biscuit?**

It's a Scotch finger biscuit - a form of shortbread made in Australia.

**Favourite TV show?**

The medical show House - Jesse Spencer of course is in it and I think Hugh Laurie is brilliant.

"Everyone wants him to get back with Susan!" exclaims Fletcher, but with no hint of surprise. "Well, in his heart of hearts, Karl wants Susan back. He knows he made a terrible mistake, but he feels that there's no way she'd take him back - he's been so bad to her.

"So he does throw himself with gusto into his relationship with Jenny, but her political career takes off, which makes it very hard to maintain the relationship.

"I can't tell you what happens, but I can tell you that around about episode 5000, which will be on air here in October, the answers to all the questions about Karl and Susan will be answered!"

We bask in the warmth of a true *Medical Student* scoop, and Fletcher is pleased to have made our day. Such are the privi-

**If you could do a duet with any other ex-Neighbours actors who have gone on to singing careers, who would you go for?**

It'd be Natalie Imbruglia I think.

**If you had a dream dinner party, who would you invite, living or dead?**

John Lennon would have to be there. I think I'd probably have to have Hitler there, because I reckon that if anyone could be that evil it's worthwhile trying to find out why. Oh, this is always a hard question - there's so many! There's a few actors I'd obviously like to meet - De Niro or Pacino or one of those guys, Meryl Streep, Dame Judi Dench or someone of that nature. But also footballers - I'm a huge Liverpool supporter so Steven Gerrard would

have to be there, or Harry Kewell.

**Who's the most attractive character in Neighbours?**

Well, there's two ways of looking at 'attractive', there's obviously, you know, physically attractive and so forth, and the other side is, is the character interesting and so forth. I actually think if you combine those two elements together - besides Susan Kennedy which is a given - then I think that Eliza Taylor-Cotter who plays Janae is actually one of the most interesting and attractive characters in the show.

**The Simpsons - who's your favourite character?**

It has to be Bart - I'm a real Bart fan, I think he's fantastic!

leges that come with fame. And with Neighbours being broadcasted in so many countries, Fletcher enjoys what he calls "a comfortable level of fame." As for being a household name, he claims never to think about it.

"It's not as if I'm Tom Hanks or someone who couldn't walk down the street - that sort of fame would be pretty hard to deal with," he muses. "I like being accessible to fans. If someone calls out to me and says, 'hey Karl!', I'll answer or wave - I stop for autographs, and people are always getting a picture." And of course, he's asked about medical ailments, "but I always make sure I give them a jokey answer. If someone says they've got a sore foot, I say well, you'd best cut it off then!"

His following amongst students, and medical students in particular, is something Fletcher revels in. "It's unbelievably awesome. I'm obviously not a young person any more, but I'm very young at heart. The fact that students support me so strongly has opened up

lots of doors for me, so I'm very, very grateful."

We finish with an open question about the future: of the music, playing Karl and life in general.

"Life for me at the moment could not be more perfect than it is now. I've got two beautiful kids in school and a gorgeous wife, who's just ended her television career by choice. So my plans for the future will be very much oriented towards the UK - I love it over here," he enthuses. "I love the work opportunities here for an actor, and I'll continue exploring the music." We ask which, of acting and singing, he enjoys the most, and there's a clear twinkle in the eye when Fletcher talks about music. "The music is the one that gives you a big adrenaline rush. Seeing an audience reacting and singing along to your own song, is just awesome."

**He's been playing Dr Karl for 12 years now but how much medical knowledge has Alan picked up over his time?**

What does 'MI' stand for? An MI is a Medical Inspection. ×

**What leukaemia did Alex Kinski have?**

He had an angioblastic T-cell lymphoma. ✓

**What's the treatment for breast cancer?**

Ah well it can be radiotherapy or it can be surgery, or combined with radiotherapy and chemotherapy. ✓

**How long is a medical degree?**

Generally it's about 2 pages I think! No, in Australia it's 7 years and then a year as an intern. × 5-6 years.

**What did Fleming discover?**

Oh-er-u-p-penicillin. ✓

**What brand is Karl's stethoscope?**

You know something? It's unbranded! It's a no-name stethoscope! It works but I don't know where it came from because there's not one piece of insignia on it. ✓

**With the medical knowledge you've acquired through your role as Karl, what's the best way to kill someone?**

The best way to kill someone is to inject air into their blood. ✓ *Sounds good to us anyway!*

**Karl's had more than his fair share of luck with the ladies but who do you think has most success with the opposite sex - doctors, actors or musicians?**

I would say that musicians get far more ladies than anyone else in the world. When we do our gigs, at the end of the gig my lead guitarist seems to attract an inordinate amount of female attention so I suspect it's musicians. × *The correct answer is doctors.....we hope!*

63%

He'd pass finals!

