

Trust him, he's (still) a doctor

Dr Phil Hammond is the world's premier author-journalist-broadcaster-campaigner-comedian-lecturer general practitioner. He is widely feted as Private Eye's medical columnist M.D and has appeared on BBC 2's Have I Got News For You five times. He was also first to expose the paediatric heart surgery scandal in Bristol. He still practices as a GP and lectures at Bristol Medical School.



Douglas Fink
Sub Editor

What medical schools did you go to?

I did three years at Cambridge and three years at St Thomas' (or Guys-St Thomas'-King's-Poland as it's now called).

When did you qualify?

1987

Given your many talents in other fields, what made medicine appealing?

Most of my work as a journalist, comedy writer and performer revolves around story telling, which is essentially what medicine is all about. It's as much a performance art as a science, and I find it easy to slip from one job to another. Medicine is a very reactive job: you have very little control over the problems presenting to you, which is why it can both very stressful and very rewarding (and occasionally very tedious).

How did you get involved in writing and performing?

I started in scatological medical school reviews (*A Back Passage to India, On Her Majesty's Secret Cervix*) and once I'd qualified I hit the Edinburgh Fringe in a double act with Tony Gardner called *Struck Off and Die*. We told very black stories about working long hours, killing patients by mistake and burying the evidence, and back in 1990 this was considered very funny. The culture now is much more serious (and less fun), and if we did the same again I'm sure the GMC would be after us. But I'm

pleased that the spirit of black humour lives on in the Amateur Transplants.

Have you ever considered ditching medical practice?

I did stop for two years, when I wrote a sitcom for the BBC and then toured the UK with a show called *89 Minutes to Save the NHS*. I then tried to go back as a GP and was told I'd have to retrain, which is what I'm doing now. I guess the moral is to experiment with other careers but always do enough of the day job to keep in touch.

Is there a favourite string to your bow?

Not really. Most of the time I recycle the same jokes in different guises but the trick to being happy seems to be having a firm dividing line between your work and social life. Time is always limited, and work is always limitless, and it's easy to get sucked into workaholism in any job. By doing lots of jobs, you can pretend to be somewhere else when you're slobbering out or playing with the kids. I've coached a junior rugby team for the last 5 years which has given me as much enjoyment as anything I've done professionally.

How do you balance all your commitments? Could you describe a typical week?

I do four sessions of general practice a week, with no on call, and on average I write three columns a week. I'll do one or two after dinner speeches but I never work weekends unless someone pays me an obscene amount of money. TV work is very variable but I turn most of it down (I've done Have



The many faces of 'a subversive, ginger love monster'.

I Got News for You five times, which I enjoy but most TV is pants). So I spend enough time at home to recognize my children.

What was your part in exposing the appalling state of children's heart surgery in Bristol?

I met Ian Hislop, editor of *Private Eye*, in the toilet at a BBC party back in 1991 and he asked me to write a column ('Doing the Rounds'). Most of the early columns were about junior doctors' pay and conditions, but some of my friends were working on the heart surgery wards in Bristol back then, and they nicknamed them "the Killing Fields" and "the Departure Lounge" because the death rates were so high. I then met Steve Bolsin, the anaesthetist who collected audit on the unit, and decided to publish it in *Private Eye*.

The subsequent public inquiry (Kennedy inquiry) showed that the columns were circulated and well read by the government and medical establishment, but no-one took responsibility for investigating and protecting patients. This is probably because the dedication and workload of the surgeons was never in doubt, but they were mixing adult and child heart surgery late in their careers and attempting the hardest operations possible on hearts the size of a plum. Audit was not compulsory and there were no defined quality standards, so the only thing stopping a surgeon operating was his or her conscience.

Did the Kennedy inquiry go far enough?

Yes. It was thorough and balanced. But as Kennedy is finding out now in his role as head of the Healthcare Commission, putting all his recommendations into practice is very difficult. There are still doctors in all specialties and at all stages of their careers who are harming patients, but we need resources not just to identify them but to help retrain and rehabilitate those who have an addiction or mental health problem.

'Buy a parrot, teach it to sneeze, and take it on the tube'

How many times have you been reported to the GMC?

Just the once, by William Hague's Press Secretary for speculating on why he was off sick when he was Tory Leader. I was taking the piss, and the Tories didn't like it, but as he was never my patient, I had no case to answer.

Do medics have a different sense of humour to the rest of the population?

Medics, nurses, police officers, fireman, paramedics, mortuary technicians... They all use gallows humour to get them through the night and there's nothing wrong with it. You can be a great doctor and have a sick sense of humour. Some would say the job demands it. It's all about having the self control to be professional in front of patients and outrageous



in the sluice room.

What is wrong with medical school in the 21st century?

You can't get a job at the end of it.

What is right about medical school in the 21st century?

The students I teach are great - assertive, funny, interested, a bit bolshy - just what we need to keep the profession alive and stop nurses from taking over.

Can communications skills be taught?

Like any skills, they can be improved with practice. But I hate the simplistic, tick box approach to teaching communication. There is seldom a "right way" to break bad news or avoid being punched, but you need to work out a few strategies that work for you.

89 minutes to save the NHS, what do you do?

Tell the truth. Have an open discussion about how much everything costs and how we have to ration resources. And monkeys will fly out of my butt.

Bird Flu: Are they making an eagle out of a sparrow? Or do we need to be seriously worried?

Buy a parrot, teach it to sneeze and take it on the tube. You'll have the carriage to yourself. Most health scares never happen.

Smoking ban: How far should the government go?

Either you ban it completely in public, or you explain why you want working class English people to lock themselves in sealed rooms full of smoke where the only food is pork scratchings that make you so thirsty you drink eighteen pints of snakebite and die twenty years before your time.

Do you have a medical hero?

Michael O'Donnell, a former GP and very funny writer who edited *World Medicine* and led a revolt against the GMC back in the 70's.

How would you like to be remembered?

As a subversive, ginger love monster.



The Amateur Transplants: the 'assertive, funny...bolshy' spirit of medical humour.