

## LIFELINE

## Antony Nocera



*Antony Nocera graduated from Monash University Medical School, Australia in 1984. In 1992, in the UK, he began working on international medical repatriations. On returning to Australia in 1994 he worked with a helicopter emergency medical service in Sydney and eventually became a Fellow of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine in 1997. He currently works as an emergency physician in Melbourne.*

**Who was your most influential teacher, and why?** My father because he taught me right from wrong, the value of hard work, a good education . . . and real estate.

**Which event has had the most effect on your work, and why?** In 1994 I was on duty with a helicopter service when a DC3 plane ditched into Botany bay. In that one moment I realised I knew nothing about disaster medicine and management and since then I have become more involved in the field.

**What would be your advice to a newly qualified doctor?** The patient is the one with the disease, the government is the one with the money, it is your duty to ensure that they both make informed decisions.

**How do you relax?** Usually the gym, but at the moment I'm engaged in the masochistic activity of renovating our house.

**What alternative therapies have you tried? Did they work?** During my medical training I went to a mission hospital on the Zimbabwe Mozambique border and saw a patient with a constellation of somatic complaints, so I took some of her blood and injected into a beaker of hydrogen peroxide to expunge the problems in her blood. It worked like charm and the patient left "cured".

**What is your worst habit?** My failure to keep a focus on my own career. But my fiance disagrees—I forget to put the toilet seat down.

**What is your favourite country?** Australia the best country in the world, but I could get used to living in France very easily.

**Do you believe in monogamy?** I do and my finance says I better!

## Jabs &amp; Jibes



## The failings of fellowship

The approaching light of dawn barely conceals my rancour. I will my aching eyes to absorb new details from my jaded copy of *Harrison's* as I stumble to the crowded desk. I could have indulged the old man in conversation a little longer, but I lost patience. His daughter deserved a better explanation. I didn't have to sense her disappointment; she bore it on her face. My mother would have cringed at this encounter with a patient,—short, sharp, and dismissive. The examinations for the fellowship of the Royal Australian College of Physicians are 2 weeks away. I don't have time for pleasantries.

The past 18 months of studying have demanded an unprecedented degree of dedication, an insidious separation from ordinary life. Recalling the talented physicians I have worked with, I feel an intense eagerness to emulate them. But I must first learn myself. However, there are times in this long journey when I become disconsolate as I calculate the immense cost it has extracted. From eager, friendly physician trainees, we have become self-centred individuals intent on one aim, obtaining the fellowship. Collectively, we have let sick colleagues remain at work, delayed patients' care, and abandoned hapless interns, forgetting our own rocky initiation.

I mumble inconsistently into the phone as I race to finish my notes. My husband's anxiety refuses to settle before his own examination. When he is gone I feel guilty—I should have offered him more support. It has been a year built on such regrets. I ruefully note the poor interaction between colleagues and wonder where our compassion has gone. How can we, the healers of the sick, not support our own? Has one examination so altered the mind and heart that we fall so cruelly short of our ideals?

My fight now consists of holding on to something simple, a sense of perspective. But I cancel social engagements with growing ease and conveniently forget important occasions. I live a life centred on my needs, and for all my inadequacies, the examination is my crutch. Yet, I feel a desire to achieve a balance, however fine, and become frustrated as I fall short of my aspirations to be a sum of the whole, not a fragmented individual, unable to integrate competing interests. Perspective, I remind

myself, is what I must struggle for. I feel flawed, empty that I stand isolated, answering only to an imagined higher calling. I hear my conscience plead with me at night, not to lose sight of the simple things in life—friendship, love, compassion.

And tonight, I know that when I falter again, I will remember Sally. Sally arrived earlier today, a young mother, ridden with ovarian cancer, drowning in a large pleural effusion. I walked in to find a frail, cachectic woman, perched on the edge of the hard hospital bed. Too exhausted to talk, each breath strained her meagre resources. Her eyes burned from crying, gaunt cheeks bearing the telltale signs of misery. A defeated husband sat by her side, stricken equally by grief and tiredness.

After I had drained her effusion, she looked up and asked inexplicably, "What is your most fervent desire in life?" Driven by a single thought all year, I blurted, "To pass my exams". Smiling weakly, she raised a bony hand into the air. "I'm sure you will, but I wish you luck." As I left, I heard a quiet, unwavering voice behind me. "And Doctor, I hope you never get cancer." Humbled and enlightened, I walked ahead, lost for words, to thank her for this unwitting restoration of my perspective.

Ranjana Srivastava

