THE LITTLE BLACK BAG

A lot has been written on what doctors should be — committed, compassionate, competent, communicative — but doctors do not have a monopoly on such human attributes; they apply equally to other healthcare professionals.

So, what do doctors do that others don’t?

Since time immemorial, doctors’ primary function has been the consultation: the gathering of information, the diagnosis and explaining of its consequences. In this process, simple technology is critical — the stethoscope, the clinical thermometer, the oro/ophthalmoscope, the sphygmomanometer and humble neurological tools.

Beyond their clinical utility, these instruments are also symbols of the doctor’s craft. The little black bag is another such symbol. Its identification with doctors was captured in the pages of Life magazine in the 1940s, which featured a photograph of a country doctor making a house call, carrying his black bag.

US physician Martin Duke argues that it served as a badge of protection.* This idea also surfaced in Sinclair Lewis’s novel Arrowsmith: ‘The Doctor, and the Doctor alone, was safe by night in the slum called “the Arbor”. His black bag was a pass. Policemen saluted him, prostitutes bowed to him without mockery, saloon-keepers called out “Evenin’ Doc” and hold-up men stood back in doorways to let him pass.’

But no more! Public sightings of the little black bag are now rare, and house calls are ranked among medicine’s occupational hazards.

With the ageing of the population and the shift from hospital to home care or residential care, could the little black bag stage a comeback? If it did, the question might arise as to who would then carry the black bag — doctors or nurse practitioners?

* Pharos 2004; Summer: 14-16.
From the Editor’s Desk

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LETTERS

An unusual neonatal zoonosis
137
Emma J Best, Pam Palasanthiran, Monica M Lahra

Reliability of parental reports of head lice in their children
137
Megan L Counahan, Ross M Andrews, Rick Speare

Major burns: incidence, treatment and outcomes in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia
138
Fiona M Wood, Bess V Fowler, Daniel McAullay, Jocelyn R Jones

Paget’s disease of bone
138
Huy A Tran

Time for hard decisions on patient-centred professionalism
139
Stephen N Bolsin

Reducing drug-related harm: Australia leads the way
140
David GE Caldicott, Cameron Duff

Consensus statement on diabetes control in preparation for pregnancy
141
Barry NJ Walters, Sivanthi Senaratne

The other side of the coin: safety of complementary and alternative medicine
142
Edzard Ernst

SNAPSHOT

Neurological sequelae of chronic profound hypocalcaemia
123
Huong Van Nguyen, Seng Khee Gan

BOOK REVIEWS

In the shadow of “just wars”. Violence, politics and humanitarian action reviewed by Ian Maddocks
124

Reading doctors’ writing: race, politics and power in Indigenous health research 1870-1969 reviewed by Ian T Ring
124

Children of parents with mental illness 2. Personal and clinical perspectives reviewed by Nicholas A Keks
125

OBITUARIES

128 Bruce Wilson Griffiths by Hedley G Peach
128 Alan Leslie Nicholson by Hedley G Peach

CORRECTION

144 Doctors in the Pacific (Med J Aust 2004; 181: 597-601)

IN THIS ISSUE

BOOKS RECEIVED

IN OTHER JOURNALS
THE LITTLE BLACK BAG

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