

Learning organisations do this through developing the capacity for dialogue, a conversation in which a group “thinks together,” allowing itself to discover insights that might not be accessible to its members thinking individually.¹⁷ Dialogue in organisations or human systems is easier where relationships based on shared meaning and purpose already exist, but it is also a means of creating and developing these. The increasing plurality of primary care organisations, with attendant variety in their approaches to clinical governance, should provide a rich source of comparative research in future.

Conclusion

The government has specified the first steps towards clinical governance, but this will not guarantee the culture change that was its declared aim. In the light of high profile system failures in Bristol and elsewhere, the government is understandably concerned to reassure the public. But if clinical governance is driven solely by an agenda of control and risk management, the result could be compliance rather than commitment. The price will be the loss of that inventiveness and innovation that secures a culture of continuous improvement.

- 1 Berwick DM. Continuous improvement as an ideal in health care. *N Engl J Med* 1989;320:53-6.
- 2 NHS Executive. *Clinical governance: in the new NHS*. London: NHSE, 1999. (HSC 1999/065.)
- 3 Greenhalgh T. Change and the team: group relations theory. *Br J Gen Pract* 2000;50:452-3.
- 4 Grol R, Baker R, Wensing M, Jacobs A. Quality assurance in general practice: the state of the art in Europe. *Fam Pract* 1994;11:460-7.
- 5 Audit Commission. *The PCG agenda: early progress of PCGs in 'The New NHS'*. London: Audit Commission, 2000.
- 6 Beckhard R, Pritchard W. *Changing the essence: the art of creating and leading fundamental change in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1992.
- 7 Schein, E. *Organizational culture and leadership: a dynamic view*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1985.
- 8 Buchanan D, Boddy D. *The expertise of the change agent: public performance and backstage activity*. London: Prentice Hall, 1992.
- 9 Shortell S. Physician involvement in quality improvement. In: Blumental D, Scheck A, eds. *Improving Clinical Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995.
- 10 Kotter, JP. *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996.
- 11 Ayres IL, Cooling R, Maughan H. Clinical governance in primary care groups. *Public Health Med* 1999;2:47-52.
- 12 Bloomenthal D, Edwards J. Involving clinicians in TQM. In: Blumental D, Scheck A, eds. *Improving clinical practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995.
- 13 Hayward J, Rosen R, Dewar S. Thin on the ground. *Health Services J* 1999 Aug 26:26-7.
- 14 Huntington J. The people's champion? In: Meads G, Huntington J, Key P, Mumford P, Brown E, Evans K. *The unsupported middle*. Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical, 1997:2-6.
- 15 Marsh GN. *Efficient care in general practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- 16 Huntington J. From invention to innovation. In: Meads G, ed. *Future options for general practice*. Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical, 1996:211-21.
- 17 Pratt J, Gordon P, Plamping D. *Working whole systems: putting theory into practice in organisations*. London: King's Fund, 1999.

When I use a word . . .

Chickenpox

In his dictionary of 1755 Samuel Johnson says that chickenpox is so called “from its being of no very great danger.” And the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that it is probably “from the mildness of the disease.” Although this banal explanation is probably the correct one, other suggestions abound.

For instance, in his *Exanthemologia* of 1730, Thomas Fuller suggested that it was from “the smallness of the Specks, which [our Women] might fancy looked as tho' a Child had been picked with the Bills of Chickens.” Well, believe it if you like.

Then Charles Fagge in *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, published posthumously in 1886, proposed “chick-pease” as the origin. And Lerman (*Clin Pediatr* 1981;20:111-2) showed that chickpeas can look like chickenpox vesicles, by, wait for it, soaking them and placing them on 2 cm pink discs laid on flesh coloured paper. However, according to the *OED*, “chick-pea” came into being only through a scribal error for “cich-pease,” from the Latin *Cicer arietinum* (see *BMJ* 1999;320:990); and that happened in the 18th century, by which time the term chickenpox was already in use.

Another suggestion is that chickenpox has something to do with the Old English word *giccan*, to itch (*Lancet* 1978;1:1152). But this is unlikely. Firstly, the *g* in *giccan* transliterates the Old English letter *yogh*, which looked like the upper two strokes of a lower case *z*ed on top of the lower half of an Arabic three, and which in *giccan* was pronounced like a *y*. This gave the Scots word *yuke* and the modern German and Dutch words for itch—*jucken* and *jeuken* (both pronounced something like *yooken*). And, as Edmund Weiner at the *OED* confirmed when I asked him, *yogh* never became *ch*.

Moreover, *giccan* lost its initial letter and became *itch* in the 14th to 15th centuries, too soon to give rise to “chickenpox,” whose first recorded use was not until 1694, in Richard Morton's *Exercitatio de Febris Inflammatoriis*: “quod Variolae istae (quod primo monui) erant maximae Benignae eae scil. quae vulgo dicuntur *Chicken-Pox*” (a citation that surprisingly hasn't yet made it into the *OED*).

Now, having peddled the unlikely postulates (?postulates) of others, I offer a folk etymology of my own. An Arabic word, *sikka*^b, a coin die, was used to name the mint in Venice, the *zecca*, which produced the *zecchino*, a coin that came to be known in English as a *chequeen*. In *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (4:2:28 or 16:24, depending on which edition you read) Pandar says that “three or four thousand chequeens were as pretty a proportion to live quietly, and so give over.” In Shakespeare's time a *chequeen* was a gold coin worth about eight old shillings (40p). Through French the *zecchino* got the name *sequin*, which was later devalued and came to mean a cheap sparkling decoration—for example, on a dress.

But in the 15th century the *chequeen* travelled to India, where it became a *chicken* or a *chick*, a coin worth about four rupees. And the earlier form of the word also survived there, as a *sicca* rupee, a newly minted silver coin held to be worth more than a worn one. In their Anglo-Indian dictionary of 1886, *Hobson-Jobson*, Yule and Burnell conjectured that *chicken hazard*, a dice game played for small stakes, “*chicken stakes*,” came from the *chequeen*. And a *chicken nabob*, according to Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1961), was a man returned from India with but a moderate fortune.

So perhaps the chickenpox was, by comparison with those more serious infections, the great pox and the small pox, merely as you might say a catchpenny.

Jeff Aronson *clinical pharmacologist, Oxford*

We welcome articles of up to 600 words on topics such as *A memorable patient, A paper that changed my practice, My most unfortunate mistake*, or any other piece conveying instruction, pathos, or humour. If possible the article should be supplied on a disk. Permission is needed from the patient or a relative if an identifiable patient is referred to. We also welcome contributions for “Endpieces,” consisting of quotations of up to 80 words (but most are considerably shorter) from any source, ancient or modern, which have appealed to the reader.