

# The other side

Adele sings a song called *Hello*, which is about a mythical phonecall she makes to an ex-boyfriend about how different life is now compared to when they used to date. The chorus line repeated many times is “Hello from the other side” and it was this chorus I caught myself humming as I sat behind the desk at the St David’s Hotel in Cardiff at the Part 2 FRCOphth exam waiting for the first candidate to enter. I had always wanted to be an examiner since being a candidate myself many years ago. Like three musketeers my sandy haired colleague, my Hong Kong friend and I all travelled up to Newcastle to do the exam. We had driven up from Wales in mid-winter and I remember every inch of the journey up and across the snow-covered Pennines. I was in the back seat asking viva questions to the driver whilst my Chinese colleague played Candy Crush, which was all the rage at the time, in the passenger seat.

I had my hand written condensed notes with me on 27 sheets of paper and as every sign showed a decreasing distance to Newcastle the notes became stickier with sweat and more crumpled as I uselessly read and re-read the same information without taking anything in whatsoever. To calm myself I asked about the intricacies of Candy Crush and learnt about the dangers of chocolate and the difficulty of jelly in crushing that all important candy. Sweet. It really was the modern equivalent of going to war, and I did think more than once of the Men of Britain going to war against the invading English at a nearby place called Catterick. The Britons were wiped out almost to a man (getting blind drunk the night before the battle had evidently been a strategic error) and every Welsh child learns of this event through the poems of Aneurin during Welsh Literature GCSE.

I absolutely had no intention of getting drunk the night before the week-long ordeal awaiting me, though I doubted I could have kept much down anyway. The exam was in fact incredibly stressful and every twitch, huff and shuffle every examiner made was slowed down and magnified in my over-excited brain until I was entirely frazzled by the end of that trial. It was a more sombre experience driving back; defeated and dazed we drove mostly in silence, apart from the clicking of the Candy Crush game in the passenger seat. The three of us vowed to be examiners one day but be kind and good. No huffy writing in the lower box for us, no

snide remarks or tapping the pen on the clipboard, no looking over our glasses at the candidate with a gigantically long stare after asking a poorly written question; we would be friendly and warm and approachable.

But was I? The first lesson I learnt as a new examiner was that some candidates knew much more than I did and ever since Newcastle my knowledge had in fact been in terminal decline. The biggest challenge was trying to appear knowledgeable; the answers were all written in front of me but some of the candidates went off piste in such a way that I sometimes was not too sure if it was utter rubbish or inspired genius, so I found I had to nod sagely and say something non-committal such as ‘right’ or ‘okay’ and write something semi-meaningful with what I considered an intelligent, thoughtful look. The obviously wrong answers were easy to spot and I had time to formulate an appropriate facial expression. By and large I preferred what I liked to think was an ever so slight judicial frown but might have come across as a person having a slight transient ischaemic attack.

The main challenge was actually coordinating all the various organisational bits. I had to welcome the candidate, start the stopwatch, confirm their number, start the recording device and ask the first question all within a millionth of a second. It was not that uncommon for me to find a minute or two had gone by and the timer was still off or the recorder not activated and I had to quickly start these devices while maintaining a professional composure and giving the impression all the while that starting recording three minutes into a ten minute viva was the normal course of events. I found the odd tut-tutting and variously interspersed frowns and nods might give people a sort of sense that I knew what I was doing. Which I didn’t.

The OSCE was much the same, although the patients became well known to me by the end of the day and we formed a sort of bond, along with my fellow examiner who was an excellent old-school fellow who exuded a proper ophthalmologist vibe. I determined to be like him and basically copied everything about him, even his mannerisms, in such a way that toward the end I feel I confused him a bit.

I understood a key lesson in the whole thing. That examiners don’t necessarily know that much more than the candidate but that they provide the best environment possible for them to pass. They weren’t

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ogres and I wasn’t the great saviour I thought I would be. I was proud to be a dove, however, and a dovier dove there might never have been.

I did try to be kind. I hope I was. I liked to think I was all that I wanted to be back in the halcyon days of Newcastle. But perhaps in reality I was concentrating so much on trying to look like I knew what I was doing that I did come across like those grumpy examiners from the past; but my big epiphany was that perhaps these people in turn were just trying to get on and didn’t really mean to come across rudely. Although I purposefully wrote all my comments in the upper box, tried to smile whenever I could and marked as favourably as possible, it did occur to me that perhaps I was caught in the vicious examiner cycle and some people might think I was a tyrannical examiner like those of old. Despite my best efforts. As Adele might attest to, it’s difficult on the other side.

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