

The ghost of Christmas present

"Ah, youth is wasted on the wrong people."

Some will recognise this as one of the many brilliant quotes from what is considered to be the best Christmas movie ever – Frank Capra's tear-jerker *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), although for me a close contender for this accolade has to be *Die Hard* (1988). However, I recognise that classifying John McClane (Bruce Willis) cavorting around the Nakatomi Plaza shooting terrorists on Christmas Eve as a Christmas movie is controversial and will be debated ad infinitum.

In the week before Christmas, I will try and find some time to squeeze in a trip to one of the local cinemas to see *It's a Wonderful Life* on the big screen so that I can enjoy it without any distractions (dog wanting to be let out, wife needing something from the garage, Amazon delivery driver at the front door etc.). But therein lies the problem – a lack of time. Given that many of us are in the same boat, inundated with multiple festive tasks on top of our normal workload, Pete's "Ghost of Christmas Present" is here with some advice to help negotiate a couple of the hurdles which lie in wait.

One of the main activities to safely navigate in the run-up to Christmas is the work Christmas night out. There are a few pitfalls for this festive evening of fun and frolics which I will help you to avoid. The first is, of course, to make sure you are not the organiser of this event, which I have made the mistake of taking on in recent years. This involves a nightmare of logistics.

First is to gain a consensus of where to go for the evening. Having spent over a decade attending consultant meetings I am aware that it is impossible to get this group of individuals to agree to anything. Anyone who actually ever achieves this task should be appointed chief United Nations negotiator for international flashpoints around the world. Then there is the task of finding out who wants to go, how many courses each person wants and how many want each various option (chicken, vegetarian, etc.), followed by collecting the deposits. There is also the fear that by the time everyone has made up their minds, the venue booking availability will have changed and you return back to the start of the process, like a game of Ludo.

When the evening finally comes around, one of the factors determining how enjoyable the night will be is who

you sit next to. For our Christmas night out, obviously I don't want to sit next to Harry, my vitreoretinal colleague again, and listen to him drone on about the latest advancements in retinal detachment surgery, as I have to put up with that regularly on our Sunday morning mountain bike outings. No, I want to sit next to my corneal colleague to discuss which Streetfighter II arcade game character has the best special move, or my Clinical Director, using this relaxed environment to tentatively bring up the fact that I may want to take a sabbatical in the next couple of years and how cycling around Europe aimlessly for a few months will in fact benefit the department [1].

But how do you maximise your chances for an optimal seating position I hear you ask? Well, I shall explain. If you arrive early, you are a sitting duck and at the mercy of Harry arriving immediately afterwards and plonking himself down right next to you. Arrive too late and you run the risk of a Hobson's choice scenario with the one seat remaining next to Harry as the only option. No, the answer is to turn up about 10 minutes after the set time for arrival, when hopefully many guests will have already arrived and a target-rich environment of potential seats. The timing will be a matter of guesswork though, and staking out the venue checking out the arrivals from a distance with binoculars wearing a trench coat and sunglasses, whilst being a foolproof solution, is probably a bit excessive.

At the end of the evening the bill is delivered by the waiter to the poor unfortunate soul who made the booking. Splitting the bill equally amongst all attendees, which would be the easiest option, unfortunately is usually never deemed acceptable given that some spent more than others (more courses, expensive bottle of Chablis, etc.). What follows therefore is a chaotic series of different payments into a gathering pile of money on the table. With items like service being forgotten, at the end of the process there is invariably a shortfall and a deserted room, with the organiser left to make up the difference as a reward for organising the whole event and leaving them with a face like the Grinch.

Another element to achieve an optimal outcome with at this time of year, if you participate in one, is the dreaded Christmas on-call rota. From over 20 years of participating in this I have the following

advice: if there is a choice, the best days to select to be on call are Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. From experience, dare I use the jinxed "q" word, they are generally very quiet. Also, as a bonus, because you work into the subsequent bank holiday, you get an extra day of annual leave. Result. Christmas Day is invariably super quiet as no one seeks attention then, but the disadvantage is having to be on edge all day that you may be called in. The bonus for this day though is that because you again work into another bank holiday you get two extra days of annual leave [2]. Double result! The busiest days to be on call are Boxing Day and January 2, which should be avoided at all costs [3]. It is well known though that the on-call rota is a game of chance, and at any moment a bad roll of the dice can send you sliding down a metaphorical snake all the way to Accident and Emergency to manage a difficult case. As Effie Trinket said in the movie *Hunger Games* (2012): "May the odds be ever in your favor."

With that I shall sign off for 2022 and wish that you are not lumbered with organising the work night out, you luck out with the Christmas on-call rota lottery, and you manage to enjoy some precious and peaceful moments with your loved ones.

"Yippee-Ki-Yay and a Happy New Year!"
as John McClane might say.

Footnotes:

1. Dear Clinical Director, if I don't get to sit next to you during the Christmas night out, please take this as a heads-up for the next job planning meeting.
2. Be careful though, always read the human resources small print. If Christmas Day or Boxing Day fall on a weekend, the day in lieu rule doesn't count. Yah boo sucks!
3. The busiest day ever to be on call for an ophthalmologist is the day after a total solar eclipse. This happened to me on 12 August 1999 as a trainee in Glasgow. I have never been so busy with patients concerned that they had damaged their vision. People are warned not to look at the sun directly during the eclipse, but they do. Lots of them. So, if any ophthalmology trainee from the future in the UK is reading this, take the day off on 24 September 2090. Trust me.

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