

Jury duty

Until a few years ago doctors were exempt from jury duty. I am glad that this exemption was lifted as the stint I did at the crown court in Swansea recently was one of the most illuminating two weeks I have ever had. Initially I was anxious, mainly due to the nuclear detonation it would cause in my clinics as barely six weeks notice was given and the waiting time for patients was already verging on the obscene. The letter from the court was also gloriously vague in saying that the duty itself could last anywhere from a week to three months or more, before advising that suitable arrangements be made in case the trial was very long. I guessed the only suitable arrangement the hospital would accept in those circumstances would be my resignation. There was a helpful sentence at the end of the letter stating that informing the usher at the beginning of the first day might help if a long absence from the workplace was a problem. So on the first day I dutifully did this and was promptly told in an officious tone that I was asking a representative of the crown to commit serious fraud by requesting him to select a specific trial for a specific juror. It was random and that was the only way it could be.

After all the potential jurors were checked in and sat down, the same usher then announced to the room that many trials were cancelled and some of us might have to wait around pointlessly for a few hours. There was no reading material apart from legal pamphlets and the only television was stuck on a muted *Jeremy Kyle* show. Nobody could leave in case they were called and doing so would have some unstated hideous consequences. But that was okay, as I had a collection of books ready, and happily fished out my first one, a book by Simon Armitage about a long walk he took once. As it turned out it was a hugely self congratulatory walk gushing with self love, from which I was mercifully saved after an hour as I was then called in for my first trial. There were 19 of us in all and after some half an hour of legalese a random number were sent back to the jury waiting room. I remained.

The trial itself lasted five days and perhaps on a good day three hours of actual work seemed to be done. There were late starts, long lunches and frequent breaks, such that more time was spent waiting around than listening to testimony. Judging by the state of the waiting room the other courts were functioning similarly, as the same familiar faces were there at each break uselessly trying to change the channel to something other than a soundless *Cash in the Attic* or to find the volume control. Others would attempt to purchase stale food from a vending machine that gave no change and in which items bought would jam if the

angle of fall was just right, in full view behind the glass but utterly inaccessible from the outside world. Happy pyramids of crisps and flapjacks, so near yet so far away. One or two would attempt to read, still others would discuss their case in hushed tones fully aware that they were not allowed to do so and there were always one or two arguing with the usher at any one time about how pointless it all was. The usher would repeat on loop to all who asked how any attempt to leave before time would result in premature death, increased taxation, a plague of locusts and various other disasters that were best avoided. Grim posters stared down from the walls advising the immediate reporting of terrorist threats, with accompanying pictures of sly looking cartoon individuals with backpacks ready to strike terror into the heart of the citizenry.

As the jury, we were told by the judge how vital we were to the judicial system, how grateful everyone was that we could come and how we were not to talk or interact with anyone about anything to do with everything we were witnessing. When a juror's mobile phone went off during a particularly tedious cross-examination of a witness who barely remembered his own name with any degree of accuracy, the collected wrath of the whole court was suddenly turned towards the offending individual. To his credit he looked mortified as he helplessly fumbled with his phone in an attempt to quell the humiliating sounds of a *One Direction* song he had ill advisedly decided would form the perfect ring tone, dropping it on the floor several times and at one stage kicking it under his seat to a position which somehow amplified the noise while making it all the more inaccessible.

At the end of the process we retired to the poky jury room to deliberate and were locked in from the outside. The judge had given very specific directions and it was clear to myself and a few others that the whole process would have been much better had the judge decided himself on which charges to find the defendant guilty rather than create the false impression of some kind of choice in which we were to help him with. He was the expert and we were helpless observers, some of whom also happened to be *One Direction* fans. A few members of the jury had their own thought processes which varied with that of the judge and caused several pointless questions to be written on the specially provided pieces of paper and sent to him where he would then give the obvious answer, while maintaining all the while the illusion that it was all a free choice. After a day and a half of being locked up, our cross section of society, including zero legal experts, finally reached our verdict and were summarily discharged. As I left, one of

the more bewildered jurors huffed that she thought justice had "not been served" and I for one was more convinced than ever that trained legal minds should decide these things and a jury in the modern age was a medieval relict.

But it was absolutely fascinating. It was fascinating to see the internal workings of the legal system, fascinating to see the courtroom process live and fascinating to see how my fellow jurors, randomly picked from the electoral roll, reacted to seeing an inherently slow, inefficient and bamboozlingly complex system in action. But, above all, I was fascinated to see the NHS anew through the eyes of patients. On returning to work I saw the glowering 'don't drive while dilated' poster on the clinic wall, complete with the picture of the upside down car in a hedge. I saw the hideous vending machines in our canteen which frequently swallow my money. I saw patients waiting helplessly to be called for hours on end in the knowledge that leaving would mean removal from the system and potential damaged eyesight as a result. I saw other patients remonstrating with clinic staff about the delay. I saw a macular degeneration patient reading an information leaflet about blepharitis and lid hygiene in the desperate need to find entertainment in an otherwise bland environment. The defining moment, however, was when I found myself guiding a patient towards a particular course of action having explained the pros and cons in such a way that the patient was signing the consent form after an utterly false sense of patient choice had been briefly allowed to flourish. "I think you've made the right choice there," I said. I even thanked them for their participation in the process.

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