Doctoring the risk society

The Tablets

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai bearing the Ten Commandments, he told God's chosen people that, if they obeyed these laws, they would be delivered to the promised land. By contrast, the Chief Medical Officer of the UK proposes Ten Tips for Better Health (included in the Spring 2004 *Choosing Health?* Resource Pack) but offers only the prospect of a longer sojourn in the bondage of our troubled world.

Sir Liam Donaldson issues a list of familiar proscriptions, in an appropriately radical and modernised form. Thou shalt not smoke (nor even "breathe others' tobacco smoke"), drink (more than the approved number of units), or have sex (at least without using a condom). While the Israelites had to rely on manna from heaven during their flight from captivity, we are exhorted to eat "at least five portions of fruit and veg each day" to sustain us on the journey into senility. In the hope of delaying our arrival at the day of judgment, we must "be physically active for at least 30 minutes, 5 days a week".

Though there is no record that Moses made any special recommendations about the problem of the Middle Eastern desert sun, his successors in the gloomy, rainy northern hemisphere tell us to "cover up, keep in the shade, never burn and use factor 15 plus sunscreen".

When we get to the Chief Medical Officer's Tenth Tip, there is a curious shift from biblical mode to the style of "Jerry's Last Word", the homily with which television talkshow host Jerry Springer ends his explorations of contemporary human frailty and depravity. Donaldson's last word is that we must "manage stress levels—talking things through, relaxation and physical activity can help". It is not clear how managing stress levels might lead to better health, nor how "talking things through" might reduce stress, nor indeed whether it is possible—or desirable—to combine relaxation and exercise. But this is all beside the point, which is to provide official endorsement to the therapeutic ethos that threatens to reduce the entire population to the status of clients of counsellors and therapists.

While the God of Moses promised freedom and redemption through the observance of the commandments, the god of "better health" offers only the prospect of a prolonged life expectancy in return for a lifetime of self-denial.

Mike Fitzpatrick
e-mail: fitz@easynet.co.uk

LUNCH WITH THE LANCET

Mark Lythgoe

Mark Lythgoe and I meet for lunch at a fashionably noisy London pub, around the corner from the Institute of Child Health where he runs an MRI laboratory developing novel stroke therapies. But we're not here to talk about his day job. I'm more interested in his thoughts on science and art, a relationship ("sci-art") he's been exploring for the past decade.

Lythgoe's collaborations have resulted in artworks that include sculptural representations of thoughts, and a film about the limits of our senses. As the lunchtime crowd of media types turns up the conversational volume, he lists his current projects: a piece for the London International Festival of Theatre, a BBC series about love, and a documentary about Einstein's brain.

It would be an understatement to call Lythgoe's career path unorthodox. After leaving school with poor grades, he studied for a diploma in radiography, then served an apprenticeship in a factory making plastic pipes. He subsequently trained attack dogs in Israel and worked with the Australian flying doctor service, investigating tuberculosis prevalence.

Aged 27, he returned to the UK and landed an MSc place despite having no undergraduate degree. Once that was completed he took off again to be a mountain climber, but a frightening experience on Sangay, South America's most active volcano, prompted a return to London and a PhD in biophysics.

As our food arrives (polenta with mushrooms for me, monkfish for him), Lythgoe launches into an explanation of how his interest in sci-art really began with his PhD. "I remember the first day when an image came off the brain scanner; it was so beautiful, I was absolutely mesmerised." His appreciation was rooted in understanding how the image was created, and what its clinical implications were, he says. "I don't believe there is an art image that holds so much power; on the basis of a single two-dimensional image, this kid will be defined as normal or abnormal."

He wrote about his ideas in UK magazine *Coil*. In 1999, an exhibition with artist Jane Gouge was highlighted by London listings magazine *Time Out*. They sold 19 of the 24 works in the first week. "It was a contemporary art piece that could stand up in the art world", he says. "I didn't want to use science to create bad art."

Lythgoe's early collaborations were self-generated. More funding is available for sci-art now, but is that necessarily a good thing? "The funding provides an opportunity for experimental projects, some of which work and some fail. It also has allowed an awful lot of science and art projects to develop that never would have", he says. "Although in some respects I would like to see perhaps less funding going on, to whittle down a lot of the crap that's out there."

Mark Lythgoe, Andrew Kötting, Proboscis

***Mapping Perception* (cropped image)**
Mark Lythgoe is on the far right. Photo by Gary Parker.

Recently, Lythgoe collaborated with film director Andrew Kötting, who wanted to look at the world through the eyes of his daughter, Eden, who has a neurological disorder called Joubert's syndrome. The result was a film and an installation called *Mapping Perception*, and a shift in Lythgoe's views on the roles of art and science.

"At the beginning, I thought science could answer every question", he says. "I said to Andrew, just bring your daughter in and once we understand everything about what's wrong with Eden, I'll be able to tell you exactly what her world looks like." 2 years into the project, "my blind faith crashed, and I realised that science had very serious limitations". Now, aged 41, his emphasis in his sci-art collaborations has changed from explaining science to exploring questions that may be beyond its scope. "I definitely get up every morning and look at the world differently because of the art projects I've been involved in", he says. "It's hard to imagine that those interactions will not impact on my science on a daily basis."

"The art world poses, invariably, questions that science can't answer", he says. "Art doesn't provide answers, but it does provide understanding." On that lofty note, he says goodbye. The BBC people are waiting, he explains, to film a scene in the laboratory toilets.

Stephen Pincock