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**Dr Michael O'Donnell in interview with Lord Walton of Detchant  
Oxford, 10 October 1997**

JW Well Michael, good morning.

MOD Good morning to you.

JW And I'm very grateful to you for agreeing to be interviewed, because you've had an extraordinarily varied and interesting career. I will come to that in a moment, but before we go further I would like you to tell us something about your early life, your recollections of childhood and your parents and family.

MOD Well I grew up in a, my dad was a GP in a mining village in Yorkshire, three miles outside Doncaster. And he was an enormous influence in my life actually, because he was a, nobody quite knows what he did until the age of 30 when he became, took up medicine. The family rumour is as a bet with his brother, his brother was on the GMC [General Medical Council], a rather pompous character actually, and my father said ... was very proud he'd become a doctor... My father said 'Any fool could do that,' and did. But he was ... I, this was the 1930s when I remember growing up, and he was very much part of the village. He was much more like a social worker rather than a GP now. And the abiding memories I have of that time were with my sister helping load up the back of this funny old car he had which had a great boot, with hay boxes of soup that he used to take round the mining ... because the, of the depression. And he used to say, you know, 'This is what they need, soup not medicine.' My mother used to brew up the soup on the kitchen range at home. And, so that was part of a sort of introduction to an idea about medicine that he had. And the other thing was I used to sit on the front of his car, as he went on his rounds. And I used to have to do a thing called the boot count which was, I, the kids were playing in the street, and they would pick, they would sort of look at the doctor's car and they wouldn't come near to it, but I had to count how many of them had boots on. And I had, I used to do these five-bar gates, the boots and the non-boots, and my dad used to keep the boot chart in the surgery of the percentage really of those who were, kids who were wearing boots

JW Like a, like a cricket scorer?

MOD Yeah, mm. And he used to say, he used to take me in there of an evening and say, you know, 'As the boot count goes up so we're winning,' he said. So he had a very sort of, what would be these days I suppose sort of social, sociologist's attitude to medicine. I think he was quite a good doctor because in those days there wasn't a lot mechanical that a GP could do, but there was an awful lot that he did to sort of help people. And he was sort of a friend of the family, and... It was, I mean it was incredibly moving when he died in 1957, because he'd been, he was the only doctor there during the war, he knew them all. And he was a romanticist and wanted to be buried in Ireland, so he was going to be buried in Ireland, but they insisted on having a service in the, in the village. And I remember that the hearse came into the village, and my mother and my sister and I were in a car following it. On the outskirts of the village the, all the miners were there in their best

suits, sort of Sunday suits, and they stopped the hearse imperiously and they took the coffin out and carried it through the village to this little tiny chapel in the middle of the village. I ... it was one of the most moving experiences of my life, and I suddenly realised what being a family doctor had been in his lifetime. I mean it's a totally different era. But he ... he was determined I wouldn't become a doctor. I think he was being very Machiavellian about it, but he didn't want me to become a doctor out of habit. And my parents weren't all that well off really.

JW Did you go to the local primary school?

MOD No, I went to the, to the local convent primary school. And then my parents, as parents did and probably, and still do of course, made enormous sacrifices because they wanted me to go to public school. And they really spent nothing at all on themselves. And again I suppose it's to be, to do with ... if you've been, my father, parents both grew up in Ireland, and if you have been part of a country that's been colonised you play, lay great stress on education. I always remember my... Again, a thing my father always used to say to me floated over me at the time, and only more recently have I realised the significance of it, he said, you know, 'If you ever want to invest in anything, invest in education, because education is something that nobody can take away from you.'

JW Quite.

MOD And I've heard that since from other ... immigrants arriving in this country. So, I went to public school, I went to Stonyhurst, and then got a scholarship from Stonyhurst to Cambridge.

JW The Lane Harrington scholar.

MOD That's right!

JW Now what does that, what was that scholarship?

MOD I don't... It was, it was endowed by a man called Lane Harrington and ... who endowed one at Oxford and one at Cambridge.

JW Very ecumenical.

MOD Yes, very ecumenical! And Paul Johnson who was at school with me, who's now a journalist, mad, and is still as mad as he was when he was a schoolboy, he got the one to Oxford and I got the one to Cambridge! And I went to Trinity Hall.

JW I hadn't realised incidentally that we shared such a common background. My father was a schoolmaster and my mother a school teacher in a mining village in Durham County, and I remember very well as you do those soup kitchens, although the ones I remember were in the 1920s. Fascinating background.

MOD It, once on a radio programme I mentioned the boot count – on *Start The Week* once – and some angry chap wrote in from Leeds saying that he'd grown up in Leeds in the 1930s and there were no children without shoes on in the streets.

JW Oh, but there were.

MOD Well, of course, Leeds to me was a million miles away in those days. Was it, did you feel that?

JW Absolutely, Newcastle was totally different from a Durham mining village. Indeed.

MOD But it, but I had a very happy childhood, had a super time at school. I mean I enjoyed school enormously.

JW Both primary and public school?

MOD I'm not so sure about the nuns! But when I went away to school, when I was eight – I went to a prep school first – and the nuns taught me to tie my shoes in a granny knot, I remember, and I've never forgiven Sister Philomena for not telling me how to do a reef knot! That's why my shoes are always coming...

JW Were you sufficiently impressed with the prep and public school system to send your own children away?

MOD No I didn't. But there's another reason for that.

JW I see.

MOD And that's because my wife... My wife, her father was a colonial civil servant, was the government architect in Singapore actually in the 1930s. So in her day she had to come to, you know, she went three or four years without seeing her parents, because there wasn't the air travel then. And she felt quite strongly that she'd prefer her children to stay at home. And I went along with it, although I actually loved it. I mean, I remember reading, when I was in the, about to go to Cambridge, read a great, reading a lot. And Penguins in those days used to have very romantic des-, and I wanted to be an author, and on the back page the biographies of the Penguins used to have chaps who worked as a lorry driver, but they were always unhappy at school. And I thought I have none of the credentials to be a writer! I'm really enjoying school, and I sort of joined in everything, did everything, head, became head of the school, had an absolute ball, then at university had a super time as well. I thought...

JW So you were happy with the system, and you didn't feel in any sense discomfited by any of the aspects of the public school system? Would you be critical of it in any way at all, or do you think now it's one of Britain's strengths? What about the elitism, for example?

MOD I think so, I mean, but you see you're not aware of that when you're in it. I mean I'm much more, I was much more critical of it afterwards, but at the time I was... Well you know, if you grow up in a sort of ... a fairly depressing place a colliery village in the 1930s, and in the 1920s presumably, it's suddenly like being let out into... It was a beautiful situation in the middle of the Lancashire fells. It was like going on holiday. The only sadness about it, especially when I was younger, was the deprivation of family really. But there was a war on, and people were putting up with all sorts of things and it seemed to me you shouldn't quibble too much about that, worse things were happening to people. So I sailed through it. There was elitism. In, also I mean it was a Catholic school, a Jesuit

school, and I'm grateful to the Jesuits, as have many people been, for ... teaching us to think, really, to think. That's why so many people who go to Catholic schools end up as non-Catholics!

JW Did you start writing when you were at public school? Did you...?

MOD Yes I did. I did, I start-, I wrote a ... I won a *Daily Mail* short story competition!

JW No school magazine or anything like that that you contributed to?

MOD No, I didn't... I wrote for the school magazine, I seem to remember, but it didn't figure very largely. I did a lot of, I did a lot of acting at school and theatricals, because I thought I was going to be an actor as well then. I forgot about that. I played Polonius to Paul Johnson's Hamlet. An Irish Polonius to a red-headed...

JW Going back to your family, what was your mother's background?

MOD My mother came ... her father had been in South Africa, doing I know not what, and had come back and had, he bought a lot of farms around Mallow in Ireland. And she was a member of a large family, huge family. And they tended to split up into groups, and therefore she and one of her sisters were very close. And she lived a sort of fairly comfortable, I suppose middle-class life in Ireland, met my father at a tennis club dance I think it was.

JW I see, right.

MOD And he was the dashing young chap from the village next door, who was home on leave from...

JW Was he a graduate of the national university?

MOD No, he went to the College of Surgeons in Dublin.

JW In Dublin, yes, yes. Indeed. And you mentioned your sister. The one sister?

MOD Yes.

JW Yes. And what did she do?

MOD Now she was an actress, but then went and married an Irish doctor and that finished her career.

JW I see! So that there, so there was medicine on that side of the family, in a sense? Yes. And you still, are you still in touch with her?

MOD Oh, very much so.

JW Very much so.

MOD Every Christmas we...

JW You get together as a family?

MOD We used to be ... yes. My father died long before my mother, but we used to have a family Christmas. But my sister and I still keep it up, and our families.

JW What's your most abiding recollection then of Trinity Hall which you say you greatly enjoyed, your university career? Did you, did you find the tutorial system in Cambridge a challenge? Did you find it helpful, rewarding?

MOD No. Cambridge to me was ... I mean, I can remember very little about the sort of academic side of Cambridge, the official academic side. I can remember a lot about the unofficial academic side in that... I mean, I went up in 1946 and I was one of the few people on the corridor, I think there were 4 or 5 of us who hadn't come back from the war.

JW From the war, no.

MOD So there was an enormous sort of maturity about the undergraduate population. And there was also the feeling of rebuilding things after the war. So a group of us restarted the Footlights for instance, which had laid dormant during the war, and the ADC, the amateur dramatic club, which was the equivalent to OUDS [Oxford University Dramatic Society] at Cambridge. And we also started a newspaper, and the staff I remember, called *Varsity*, and the staff all sold, because Smiths in the market square wouldn't take it.

JW Oh really? I see.

MOD It didn't for the first day! So we all sold it off our arms, around Cambridge, the very first issue. And it was such a success that Smiths took the next issue.

JW Oh good. Curiously, I was going to ask you about the Footlights. What was your time with the Footlights, compared with that for instance of Jonathan Miller?

MOD Well, you mean, a long time ... I mean Jonathan Miller was much later than me.

JW Was he?

MOD Five or six years.

JW Five or six years after you.

MOD Yes. And I think he was there about 1953 or something like that.

JW Was he. I see.

MOD I was there '46. It's a long time in those ... and those three years stretch for a long time. But ... and so, I mean the academic side ... I wasn't actually reading medicine, this was one of my father's Machiavellian ploys. I read natural sciences for, I did a Part One in natural sciences after two years. But it did include comparative morphology, which included human anatomy, so that in fact I ended up at the end of two years exempt from Second MB. And only, there's a man called Howard Green who was my tutor, marvellous

man, who was a doctor, I mean a proper medical doctor, or maybe an improper medical doctor! But a proper PhD doctor as well. But he ... we did human anatomy because he said, he had this great deep voice, he said 'During the war we ran out of elephants for you to dissect, you have to dissect a human being.' And ... but I met all the medical students and I discovered, I mean people like Peter Sleight must have been there at the same time, but I didn't have much contact with them. Ralph Ross Russell...

JW Oh yes, I knew him well

MOD Whom you would know, you're right. I mean he was, we shared rooms in college...

JW Oh did you?

MOD ...for a term, when we had to double up, the post-war doubling up. But apart from that I didn't really know many doctors. And I didn't really regard myself as a medical student. I was much more involved in the Footlights and the ADC. And In the third year I ostensibly did a Part Two in English, which was very ... I just wrote a thesis on James Joyce and enjoyed myself for a year, I did nothing at all in terms of university pro...

JW Right. But if you had got exemption from Second MB, you must have done physiology as well as anatomy...

MOD Oh yes, well that... that was part of...

JW Part of the natural sciences.

MOD My natural sciences were physiology, comparative morphology and something else, I can't remember what it was. It had such an impact on me!

JW Well of course you must have spent a lot of your spare time writing, and it, because I was fascinated to see that you'd been a BBC scriptwriter at the time that you had become a medical student at St Thomas'. How did that come about?

MOD Well ... when I came down from Cambridge, I went off for a ... for a sort of marvellous summer I spent in Ireland as an actor, with the Lord Longford Players. And ... and I came back and wasn't quite sure what I was going to do, and I had a word with my dad. I mean one of my other, the other eccentricities of my father was that he had built his home overlooking the village cemetery. And he said every doctor – I mean it was coincidental but he used to say he'd done it by choice – he said every doctor should have a house overlooking the cemetery to remind us of our ultimate achievement. But he used to occasionally say, you know, 'Come and have a walk through my mistakes' and we'd go through the graveyard. And he would actually tell me the social history of the village; he knew all these people, what they'd been and the rest of it. So when I came back from Ireland he said 'Come on, let's go for a walk through my mistakes,' which was a sort of standard. And off we went and he said 'Well, what are you going to do now?' And I said 'Well, I'm not at all sure what I'm going to do.' And he said, I mean, 'Did you...?' And he'd got the thing around to talking about medicine, so he said 'Why don't you, why don't you give it a whirl, just see what it's like?' So I whizzed round, I went off to Thomas' because I knew people who had been there. I think that was why. And I went to the interview at St Thomas' and I was actually then working at the BBC. I'd forgotten that bit. I'd taken, I'd got a job in

the variety department it was called then. *Take It From Here* had just started and they were recruiting new writers. And I was working comic scripts for an unknown chap called Hancock<sup>1</sup>, one of them was called...

JW Oh really?

MOD He does the pilot with him. And anyway, while doing... That was my only sort of means of support at the time, paid the rent, and I went to the interview at St Thomas' after talking to my father. And the dean was a pathologist whose name was Barnard<sup>2</sup>, I think, but the dominant person at the interview was a man called Alan Cropford(?) who was the secretary to the medical school who'd just come back from the war. And I'd, in the pub across the road I carefully worked out my opening ploy. And so I started the interview, after I'd been sat down, I said, you know, 'Could this hospital countenance the notion of a part time medical student?' To which Alan Cropford, God bless him, replied 'Is there any other sort?' And I couldn't have said anything more calculated to get me into Thomas' I discovered later, because I later wrote a book with Dannie Abse about medical school<sup>3</sup> - or I contributed to a book - and he ... Thomas' was faced with this thing at the end of the war, rebuilding itself. What would they do? Would they become part of London University, and so that their, all their student activities would be part of the London University student activity, or would they maintain their pre-war fierce independence as a medical school? And they decided on the independence, not surprisingly. So anybody who had a sort of odd vocation was almost guaranteed to get into Thomas', they were looking for people who were anything from rugby player scrum halves to somebody like me who ... I virtually had to give a guarantee that I would do the Christmas show at St Thomas'.

JW I see, right!

MOD And I would ... And I did and I enjoyed it enormously. I, that, then I really ... I began to see what my father had been up to, in more ways than one. In one way I felt the way he'd been manipulating me to a certain extent, but in another way I could see how attractive medicine was.

JW You were then continuing to write, but presumably not working full-time at the BBC. Was it on a freelance basis?

MOD I was, well I ... I don't know if you'd call it freelance in those days, but I suppose it was. I mean I just did a certain number of projects. And I was determined not to sponge off my parents. I mean that was part of the conversation with my father. I said 'Well I will go through medical school, but I'm not going to allow you to support me anymore.' Because I ... they really had sacrificed themselves enormously, despite scholarships and everything, as you know. And they never went on holidays or anything like that. So that, so I had to support... and I went on working until six months before my finals.

JW Did you really? I remember that book *My Medical School*, which I must say I much enjoyed. One of the contributors was one of my students whom I taught, Miriam Stoppard...

MOD That's right, yes, yes.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Hancock.

<sup>2</sup> William George Barnard.

<sup>3</sup> Dannie Abse, *My Medical School*, London: Robson Books, 1978.

JW ...who was of course, who was a student in Newcastle. Her father was a sergeant in my Territorial General Hospital actually, and a ward orderly at the, at the RVI [Royal Victoria Infirmery] in Newcastle. So, fascinating, and it was a, it was a most interesting book. No one's tried since then to update it or produce another edition?

MOD I don't know. It was one of a series. They did *My Cambridge*<sup>4</sup> and *My Oxford*<sup>5</sup>. It was done by a publisher whom I know quite well actually. He's given up the series. It's still there, in the libraries, mouldering away.

JW Turning back just to one or two other points. I see that you have written [that] one of your major interests now is golf. Did you have any sporting interests at school and at university?

MOD No ... it was part of the whole enjoyment of school, and of, and of university. I just sort of joined in. I wasn't particularly good at anything, but well I ... you know, but I tried. [I never really made it at cricket. But I played, I played rugby for the school XV once or twice, but not regularly. Cross-country running I was quite good at. But I ... I enjoyed it enormously. And I always remembered the obsession that others had. Ralph Ross Russell m I mentioned, I remember going to play squash with him in Cambridge once. And on pie way out to the squash, Trinity Hall squash courts the, my squash racket got caught in the pokes of the bicycle and I went right over the top, and cut my hands and face. And Ralph first picked me up, sort of dusted me off and said 'Well, we're only, we've only missed the first five minutes of the time we booked!' And I ... and I thought well that's what differentiates me from a sportsman, because my inclination, much as I enjoyed playing, was to go home!

JW Yes quite. I can understand that.

MOD No, but I used to... I watch sport, I was a great enthusiastic watcher of sport, and...

JW Yes, indeed. Still?

MOD Still? Yes. I think it's too, I think I see too much of it now. I must have seen too ... I think it's all getting a bit different from what I remember...

JW Despite your BBC loyalties, have you been a subscriber to Sky?

MOD Yes!

JW Yes, so have I. Once the Ryder Cup went on to Sky there was no way...!

MOD It was the football that got me on to Sky.

JW Absolutely, me too.

MOD But I used to go to football with my dad, it was one of the things I shared with

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<sup>4</sup> *My Cambridge*, London: Robson Books, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Amis, Anne Thwaite, *My Oxford*, London; Robson Books, 1977.

my father, on a Saturday.

JW Did you support Leeds, or... ?

MOD No, no. One Saturday would be Sheffield Wednesday and the next Saturday would be Sheffield United. Roy Hattersley was, Roy Hattersley ... he assures me he was standing in front of me!

JW Well, you're talking of course to a long-term Newcastle United supporter.

MOD I could guess that.

JW You could guess, indeed.

MOD There isn't any other term(?), sort of Newcastle supporters.

JW No, no. Quite. Well, Cardinal Hume is another, of course. His father was the, was the professor of medicine in Newcastle. Oh well, let's go back over one or two other points which I think are really very important. At your medical school, whom do you think you would regard as being your most inspiring teacher?

MOD ... It's difficult, I mean, because I was inspired in different ways by different people. I think the most, the person I most admired was an ENT surgeon called Geoffrey Bateman who was ... I ended up as his house surgeon as it happened, who was technically the best of the surgeons at Thomas' at that time. No, but he and Harold Ridley, who was the, who was the first man to put in ... acrylic, I think it was plastic lenses anyway, for cataracts, and who was sort of not very much regarded in Thomas' because he worked in an out of the way department. And suddenly everybody was shattered when they saw him on the front cover of *Time* magazine, and they realised that he was, that important things were going on there. Other people who ... gosh, it just slipped my mind, Evan, cardiologist called Evan Jones who inspired me with a great enthusiasm for medicine.

JW He did? Good.

MOD And he, the whole ... the whole sort of excitement of medical discovery, with him, of diagnosis, I got from him. A man called Hector Goadby, who was a physician there, quiet, unassuming – I was on his firm – and who really taught us how to be, how to treat patients as human beings. I mean what, all I remember from Hector Goadby, what ... no, what I most remember from Hector Goadby is the way that he dealt with his patients, marvellously, and something that I, we all sought to emulate.

JW A communicator.

MOD Mmm ... yeah, more that that. He was sort of, he had a sort of very, he could put himself very much in the position of the patient. And he wasn't, he was regarded as a rather sort of plodding physician, I suppose, by others, the whiz-kids, but in fact he was probably, influenced an awful lot of people at Thomas' at the time. Who else was around? The ... the things I, the best bit of advice I got from, was from a plastic surgeon called Richard Battle, who was also a French horn player. Played the French horn in the Footlights orchestra, I discovered! But he said to me one time that 'As a medical student,' he said 'Don't worry

too much about learning about medicine now.' He said 'You learn that after you qualify. At the moment do as much as you can around the place to find out what's going on. Enjoy yourself, enjoy the life,' he said, 'because you really learn about medicine in the first six months after you qualify!' And I think he was proved to be right.

JW So what year actually did you qualify?

MOD I qualified in 1952.

JW '52. Was that, that was the Cambridge MB, or the London MB, or did you...?

MOD The Cambridge MB.

JW Yes, the Cambridge MB. You didn't trouble to take conjoint?

MOD No, because of my peculiar working habits, I ... I did all my... I did, because I was hard up I did Part One and Two together. Normally at Cambridge you do Part One and six months later you can do Part Two. So I waited until Christmas and did Parts One and Two together, which meant spending a fortnight in Cambridge of continual exams, a most exhausting fortnight, and managed to get rid of it all. But it saved all sorts of, it meant I was able to go on working for an extra six months.

JW I don't think people appreciate to the full just how exhausting the final examinations used to be in those days. They were marathons, weren't they? Not only in writing, but in the clinicals and the vivas and everything. Yes, so after that of course you would do one or two house jobs?

MOD I did, I did two house jobs, one ... one surgical and one medical. And I did one in the main part of Thomas' and then in the sort of country branch of Thomas' which was still going after the, after the war before it was wrapped up. And I did, it's interesting that you asked me who I most admired, I was possibly influenced by the fact that I was Hector Goadby's house physician, and I was Geoffrey Bateman's house surgeon.

JW Had you contemplated during your student career, or subsequently, the possibility of going into any specialty in medicine? Or had you always thought that you would go ultimately into general practice?

MOD Oh, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. It all stemmed from that conversation walking through the graveyard.

JW With your father, indeed.

MOD And I was ... the only reason I wanted to become a doctor was to become a GP. And there was no, as you will know, at that time there was no vocational training. So I actually picked the jobs that I, that's why I did Hector Goadby's job, because I thought he was most likely to equip me with things...

JW And you looked around for an appropriate place to go into general practice, and entered GP in 1954.

MOD ... No, I went into the army in '54.

JW Oh you went into the army, I see.

MOD '52 to '54, I did house jobs, and then I did ... what did I do? I did some locums; I did a locum with my father. My father wouldn't let me take, go into his practice – it would be too easy!

JW So you did national service in the army.

MOD And then I went into national service in '54.

JW So where did you spend your time?

MOD Ah, it's a ... hilarious time really, in that I was posted to Suez...

JW Oh yes.

MOD ...but I only got as far as Folkestone, and I spent a year in Folkestone. And then I was injected with yellow fever injec-, inoculations, and given, issued with tropical kit and was posted to East Grinstead!

JW Oh really, I see.

MOD And I was married by this time, and in the second year we took back our flat in London that we'd let, and ... I commuted in the opposite direction to the commuters in the morning. I would drive down to East Grinstead, and sit at ... arrive at the mess for lunch, then drive back in the afternoon, and go and work in Thomas' actually in the evening, because I thought I must do some medicine.

JW So you were doing what? You were acting as a GDMO [general duty medical officer], or what?

MOD No, I was, I had a spectacularly successful army career in that I was never a captain. I went straight from lieutenant to major.

JW Oh yes, so did I, interestingly, yes.

MOD And...

JW What did you do?

MOD ...because I was 2IC [second in command] of a field ambulance.

JW Oh were you, I see

MOD And I worked, I joined the field ambulance on its way to Suez at Folkestone. But it never left Folkestone.

JW Never left

MOD And then it got...

JW Oh that was for the Suez campaign.

MOD Mm.

JW I see.

MOD No, no, no. That's pre ... that comes a bit later.

JW Oh that comes a bit later. Right, OK.

MOD And then the, then we were going to go to Somalia, that's why we got the...

JW ....the yellow fever.

MOD The same dispute that's still going on. And they decided not to send us, so they sent us to East Grinstead instead!

JW Instead.

MOD And ... but while in East Grinstead, I suppose I'm not... I mean the Official Secrets Act covered it at the time, two bizarre things happened. The most bizarre was that the IRA raided the battalion at Arborfield, the ... what do you call it, where they keep all the guns.

JW Yes, yes.

MOD And ... and they rang up, and we all had to get secret security instructions that had to be gathered by hand on a Saturday or a Sunday, and I was, by a field, by an officer of field rank, and I was the only one in this huge barracks in East Grinstead. So I had to drive over to Folkestone, to the signals office at Folkestone. And I hadn't got my uniform, because I'd sent it to the cleaners! And I only had... So I went, and having lived in Folkestone for a year I knew my way round. So I went over, stopped off and saw my wife on the way because she was staying with her parents. And after a very good dinner with my father in law drove into Folkestone, into the signals office in Folkestone, and, because I knew exactly where it was. And I talked, chatting to the chap who was, all these things, chattering away. And I said I'd come for these secret orders, and he said 'Oh well, the sergeant's nipped out, he'll be back in a minute.' So he's telling me how all these things worked. And in came the sergeant, sort of stamped his feet on the floor, and asked me what... And suddenly I was peering down the barrel of a gun, and he wanted my identity. And so I handed, luckily I had all that. And he said 'How did you get in here, sir?' And I said 'Well, I drove up Horn Street where I used to live.' He said 'That explains it. If you'd come through the main gate we'd have got you easily.' However, with somebody with an Irish name, who hadn't a uniform, collecting ... for the IRA... However, that was... The more significant thing that happened when I was at East Grinstead, I've forgotten what it was now, but I, it was... Oh, it'll come back to me, because that was the least important one. Oh yes, I know what, because you'd asked me about it. It was Suez.

JW Oh yes.

MOD One of my jobs, which I actually did at home because it was easier, was I had to draw up the med-op instructions for the reoccupation of the Suez canal, which I did. And because of my experience, and because I was in 3, I was a field ambulance to 3 Div, which in those days was called the 'fire brigade' because it was the one, it was sent out to all the places, and we were the field ambulance. So knowing how things, how efficient the quartermaster's department was at Shorncliffe, I duplicated everything in these ops. And off I went, my national service was over, and I left. And I joined the Territorials in the City of London Field Ambulance, rather than go into the Army Emergency Reserve, which everybody else did because you didn't have to do anything. And they said 'Well you're an idiot, you have to do a fortnight's camp every year.' But blow me, a year or so after I come out, or less, Suez blew up. Of course everybody in the Army Emergency Reserve was called up, and we in the Territorial...

JW The TAs weren't, I know. Quite.

MOD And there was I, I'd drawn up these instructions. And a great friend of mine was involved and in fact got shot parachuting into Port Said – Sandy Cavanagh – but he discovered that my op instructions, one lot of the, all the equipment that I'd duplicated, one lot went to Libya, and the other lot was left in, went to, went to Benghazi, and the other went to Cyprus. So they never got any of their equipment at all that I'd carefully spread for 6 months. There I was, at this time at home working in general practice...

JW And you never got out to the Middle East at all then?

MOD No, not then, no.

JW Fascinating isn't it, because, I mean, I was in the army as 2IC of a hospital ship, and covered the final evacuation of Palestine in '48. So we knew the, we knew the canal zone very well. And I joined the TA as you did, but in a general hospital. Well, I hadn't realised we shared similar experiences, and one could say an awful lot more about the army. Now you mentioned that you married in '53. Where did you meet your wife?

MOD I met my wife because she was reading medicine. She was, she'd been... But that was the least important thing she was doing. She'd been in the WAF<sup>6</sup>, as a met. officer, at the end of the war. And she got a grant, a post-war grant, and decided ... and her father, her brother had been a – he's still alive, 85 now – was an ophthalmic surgeon at Thomas', and he'd been through the war. And so she thought she'd go to Thomas' as a medical student, which she did. One of the very few women there. But she really was a musician. I mean, she'd played in the RAF dance band and things like that. And when I was, one of the jobs I was doing while I was a medical student was I was writing, I wrote for a particular comedian that nobody remembers now called Robert Morton. And I used to write revue lyrics, and she wrote the music and I wrote the words. And we just happened to meet because she, I met her in Thomas', and we both discovered that we were doing these other things. So that's how... She never, she never...

JW She didn't qualify?

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<sup>6</sup> WAF [Women in the Air Force] was created in 1948 after the air force became a separate service.

MOD Well, no. It's extraordinary really that when I qualified in '52, her grant was immediately terminated. Ah, you won't remember, a houseman in those days got paid £150 a year I think it was, of which £100 was taken away for accommodation, whether you... And so on £50 a year the ... the Ministry of Defence or whatever it was called in those days removed her grant, because she now had a husband to support her!

JW I see, quite.

MOD So her reaction was to get, give up. But she wasn't really committed to medicine.

JW She wasn't, no.

MOD She got as far as ... she found pharmacology was a bit beyond her.

JW Has she continued with her music?

MOD Yes, very much so, yes.

JW She has. Good, good.

MOD Playing at this very moment somewhere or other...

JW Oh is she? I see.

MOD ...doing, for 'anaerobic dancing' is what the family call it.

JW Oh I see, right!

MOD She goes round to a...

JW Well I hope they aren't too anaerobic!

MOD ...people, people of slightly older than us, she goes and plays music from the 1940s for them, and they sort of gyrate around the room.

JW Until we talked today Michael I had no idea we shared so many common experiences. My wife was in the WAF and went to Royal Academy of Music afterwards.

MOD I knew she was a musician, but I didn't know that.

JW Yes, indeed. Now then, when you came out of the army, then you went into general practice. Where?

MOD In London. I went into a training practice with a man called Gerald Rosemont, who ... qualified in Leeds. He was a marvellous GP actually; very pragmatic, but taught me all the things that you never learn in hospital. Simple things, such as that if somebody has a headache on the top of their head, that it, it's almost certainly tension, and that left inframammary pain is probably of similar origin.

JW Exactly, quite.

MOD Now these are the sort of things that nobody ever teaches you in a hospital, and every GP knows. Probably you would have taught your students...

JW Well we, I think... Well, never mind, we won't go into that in detail, but still.

MOD But there were lots of things like that. And it, and [it] actually confirmed a lot of the things that my father had told me, like sym- ... I've only picked those two examples, but I trusted them more coming from somebody outside the family than I did from my, because I just wondered whether my father might be having me on!

JW Of course.

MOD And it was, it was not a, it wasn't a very irksome job, general practice. I worked, I did, worked, did a surgery with him, sitting in with him in the mornings, and did some visits with him. But I had the afternoon off. And then in the evening I did a surgery with him. And therefore I could write in the afternoon which was, so it suited me quite well, because while in the army I'd written a revue ... in, while I was in Folkestone, and I'd, I can't remember the details but I was, so I kept on doing it. But by this time writing was something I did in my spare time as opposed to medicine being something I did in my...

JW Did you become a member of Equity?

MOD Oh I did that when I, when I was in Ireland.

JW When you were in Ireland. Did you? I see. When you were acting in Ireland.

MOD Yes. I was in a, had to be, I was in a film with Kieron Moore and I had to have an Equity card. I've got an Irish Equity.

JW An Irish Equity card. Is that valid in the UK?

MOD Well I held on to it for years, because it was so difficult to get one.

JW I see, right. But is it valid in the UK?

MOD I've no idea.

JW No idea.

MOD It was then. Doesn't mean anything now though.

JW And apart from your acting ability had you yourself any musical interests and talent? Do you play any instrument or...?

MOD No, no. None at all.

JW No.

MOD I'm the only member of my family who is... I was in the school choir once, and it's only after... I always say, but it's almost true, it was only after they'd spent a fortune repairing the organ they discovered it was me! It just so happened that they were spending the money repairing the organ, but suddenly the choir master said 'Where's that funny noise coming from?' And he made us all sing a note, and he, and I, as I sang my note he said 'It's you! Downstairs.' So I stepped out of the loft and down into the congregation!

JW So we'll draw a veil over that. In general practice then you continued to write, because you wrote a number of television plays, I think, didn't you, or...?

MOD Mm ... yeah, that came a bit later.

JW That came a bit later, yes.

MOD But, and that... No, it was after that... I did a year as a trainee in Fulham.

JW And then?

MOD And then I went looking around for a job. And in those days - this is 1957 now - in those days it was, people forget I suppose that it was very difficult to get a job. My father, my father died actually before, he didn't know what I was going to do. I was still, I was still doing that trainee job. And I, and I remember talking to him about it, and he said 'Well I suppose you could always come here, but I think it would be the last thing you ought to do.' So I did ... something that I'd been advised to do. I went into the bar, students bar at Thomas', which was really more than a student bar, because people from the hospital used to come in. And occasionally people would find jobs there. A great chum of mine went sailing at ... he told me this in the bar, he went sailing up at Burnham-on-Crouch, and he went in after sailing, into the sailing club bar. And he was, and the local GP came in, and he said 'We've just put an advertisement for a,' an assistant with view it used to be called in those days, 'in the *BMJ*, and we've had these hundreds of replies. We can't, how are we going to deal with this?' And they had a long, maudlin conversation. And my chum ended up getting the job, because it was easier, he'd been seen, and all these poor people who applied... And he's still there actually, this chap. So he's, I heard this, there was this law about, around the bar at Thomas', and one day a chap called Ian Churchill-Davidson(?), radiotherapist, came in, and, was a great chum of mine. And he said 'Evan Jones, the cardiologist, has a friend who's looking for a partner. So why, so why don't you give Evan a ring?' So I rang up Evan, and he sent me down to see this chap Ronnie Hood, who was a GP in Weybridge, a partnership of three. And they hadn't advertised, but he'd mentioned it to Evan. And I got the job. It was a marvellous practice. I mean, it's not many practices ... 1957 this was I suppose, where the senior partner wasn't just MD, he was also FRCP. And that was ... really, I really enjoyed that. And there I was for 8 or 9, 7 - I can't remember how many years.

JW But you enjoyed general practice so much, Michael, what was it that made you decide to move to become editor of *World Medicine*!

MOD Well, I mean, this... It's difficult to answer this question truthfully because I've answered it so often, and I don't know how much I've persuaded myself. But I think what it, I mean what it was was this. It was fantastically hard work, general practice, at that

time. It was also pre the Doctor's Charter<sup>7</sup>. So it was not a very rewarding life in that anything that you did was against the system. The system was there to encourage you to be a GP, but not in the context of the practice I was in. And I think the real reason was that my 36<sup>th</sup> birthday was coming up and – and I, this is a phenomenon I've, when I've written about it a lot of people have responded to it, especially doctors – that I discovered, I thought well I'm half-way through [the] sort of average span, there's still a lot I haven't done. I'm about as good a GP as I ever will be, in fact I probably, you know, without being arrogant about it I think I was quite a good GP by then, thanks to the people who'd influenced me. And I thought well from here on I'm just going to either carry on like this, or I'm going to go into a decline and start deceiving myself, and sort of, as I'd seen happen to other people. So I decided maybe that you've got to ... to make a break, and do something else. So, and this bit I do know is true because this is the advice I've given to everybody else since who's asked me, I think when you get to that sort of, start thinking about that, if you decide you're going to change you have to burn your boats. You, lots of people, I've met lots of sad people who said 'Well I always wanted to do something else, but I just, you know, I hang around waiting for something to turn up.' If you do that... So I burnt my boats. I remember, thanks, I mean my wife, my wife really was sort of quite heroic about it. I just said 'I'm giving up,' and she said 'What are you going to do?' And I said 'I don't know yet.' And, but she didn't query that at all, and we had two young children at the time, one of them still in a carrycot. And so I had, I gave six months, I had to give six months notice to my partners, and three months to the National Health Service, which I did. So I had that time to think about it, so it wasn't... But at least I knew there was nothing at the end of that six months. And ... and I was going to try and earn my living as a writer. And, the terrible thing was that when I did give up the health service did, had done nothing about it, so all my patients, they didn't notify my patients even though they'd had an extra three months. Maybe that's what threw them. I was very angry about that. So I actually went on patching up people because they didn't know who to go to and things like that. However, I got a job, and I got a series of jobs. I did a revue with, my wife wrote the music and, called *Take to the Hills*. That was the first thing we did. And then I ... I got, I worked as ... in an advert-, as a copy writer in an advertising agency, which was marvellous. I went to J Walter Thompson. And it was like going back to university, because lots of people I'd been at university [with] were there. And the writer, the, what was called the 'creative department' was full of people who were doing other things, like me, were writing for radio and the rest of it. Irma Kurtz was there, was one, was one of my, in my group. And Gav-, who, the poet, can't remember his name, doesn't matter. But there were a whole lot of people. And we, it did ... a rather civilised world, unlike now I gather. And I did that for a, for about a year I think. I wrote *A Town Called Alcan*, I was advertising Alcan aluminium, and all sorts of things like that. And then, while I was there I heard about *World Medicine* being started. I think somebody sent me a specimen copy. And it was started with an editor called Donald Gould. And, so I wrote to Donald Gould and said 'Why don't you publish a column like this?' and I sent him a column. And he invited me out to lunch, I remember. So, from the second ... they got, Richard Gordon(?) had written the first column they had at the back of the book, and I wrote the second one. And I wrote it for about a year, still working at J Walter, doing all sorts of odd jobs, writing for Robert Morton and all sorts of things like that. And at the end of the year, Donald Gould was moving to

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<sup>7</sup> This is probably referring to the 1966 Doctor's Charter, devised by the Medical Practitioners' Union, implemented by Sir James Cameron for the BMA, and the health minister Kenneth Robinson for the government.

become editor of *New Scientist*. And *World Medicine* had been launched as an American-style newsmagazine, and it was launched by a marvellous character called Max Geffen, who is a sort of American Beaverbrook<sup>8</sup>. And he came over to, and I had dinner with him, and we got on very well. I mean he was a most marvellous, devious, Machiavellian creature, sort of cari-, just like Beaverbrook, absolute caricature of the New York Jewish manipulator. And, at the end of, when Donald was going I said to Donald, you know, 'Who's going to take over from you?' And he said 'I don't know.' He said, I said 'Well shall I put in for the job? Because I think I rather, I've got an idea of what I'd like to do.' So the next time Max Geffen came over he took me out to the meeting, and he had this huge investment in this things, and he said 'Why do you want to become editor?' And I said 'Well look, I have an idea, which I can tell you about later, about something I want to do.' And ... and I told him what it was. And he then said the most marvellous thing when I was leaving, which he, sort of – the difference between Beaverbrook and Murdoch I think, because Murdoch would never say this sort of thing – Max Geffen, when I was leaving he said, he said 'Well, I reckon you're, you can do the job well. We'll give it a whirl,' he said. 'But for I, for God's sake,' he said, 'don't let it get in the way of your writing. Your writing's much more important.' Anyway, this was his investment, he was going... So, I got the job. And I then set about doing what I'd wanted to do, I suppose, without knowing it for a long, long time.

JW Right. And you said you had an idea, something you really wanted to do with it. What was that?

MOD Well, it goes back to the days when I was a GP in Weybridge, in that at the end of the mornings... We all worked in separate houses in those days, four partners, each had our own consulting room in our house, no, I mean this was pre-waiting lists and things like that, and our own patients came to see us, we got up at night for our own patients. And except maybe half a weekend, Saturday afternoon and Sunday – I got one in three off I think, something like that. But one of the rituals was, because of this, at the end of the morning surgery we'd all go down to Weybridge Hospital, which was a community hospital, very good one, where the local consultants would come, and the surgeons would come and do sort of fairly routine operations like varicose veins. Nothing too dramatic.

JW No, quite.

MOD Probably gall bladder they might occasionally ... that's about as high up the scale... But in the surgeons' room coffee used to be served, and all the local GPs used to come in, at least those of a certain age like my age, the younger ones, and some of the older ones. And we'd gossip away in the corner of the coffee, before going out doing our rounds. And it was, it was a sort of postgraduate education really; we talked about problems we had in a non-competitive way, sought one another's help, gossiped about what was going on in medicine. And ... and I did this for, what, 9 years, however long I was there. And I, when I then moved out of medicine I felt well there's nowhere, there's no journal, there's no forum in medicine that reflects this sort of conversation, which was so much part of our lives. Consultants and GPs, because it was the consultants joined in these conversations as well. And I thought well maybe there should be a journal that does this.

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<sup>8</sup> Was editor of the *Daily Express* and *Sunday Express*.

JW The start of CME [Continuing Medical Education], in a way.

MOD Yeah. But it was, no, looking at medicine in a fairly realistic... The only medical journals at the time were the *Lancet* and *BMJ* and *The Practitioner* really. And that seemed to describe a world that was slightly remote from our, from our experience. You, I mean you recognised the conventions of those journals, and you recognised the need for the conventions of those journals, but there somehow seemed to be room underneath for people to be more irreverent, to make comments, the sort of comments we would make in that. So that's what I wanted to do, so I set about doing it, and discovered in the process that if you have an idea, if you sort of set up a forum people will find it. In other words, in the end, I remember David Cargill once saying, and I was rather pleased with it, in a letter to something or other that *World Medicine* was the only journal that was actually written by its readers!

JW Yes, quite!

MOD And it was, the people knew that they wanted to say certain things, and I regarded the role of an editor as that, really as a sort of keeper of the forum. I just had to be reassured on two things. That any views that were expressed were honestly held, and also that they were expressed in a literate and articulate way, an understandable way, and weren't layered over with pomposity or anything. But you get caught out off, on the first thing, very often you do, but as you get at it longer you know the sort of people who are going to manipulate you and you don't... But it will happen...

JW Well, of course.

MOD ...except, but I think it's a small price to pay. And obviously it was a success because people responded to it. They started reading it, and even more so they started contributing to it. And so much so that one of the most difficult jobs in the end at *World Medicine* was the person who edited the letters page, because we had, the letters page went on and on, and we still could get very few of the letters in that we actually got.

JW It was hugely successful. What was the ultimate circulation of *World Medicine* though, do you remember, roughly?

MOD Mm, about 20 ... oh I don't know, was it 32,000? I can't remember, can't remember.

JW Mm, but it was enormously successful. And I must say we always used to look forward to it arriving.

MOD Well, you contributed to it.

JW Oh yes, I did. I was a...

MOD You were one of the people that came into the forum!

JW I wrote several things about it. I remember you had a series on why I became whatever, why I became a neurologist and many others. I enjoyed it. And I remember

one notable paper by Jack Foster on the putting yips<sup>9</sup>, which was quoted very extensively afterwards. So, it was, it was an exciting period, and you did that for, what, twelve years?

MOD Mm...

JW Something like that.

MOD Fifteen.

JW Fifteen, fifteen. And if you look back upon that period, obviously one of the most fruitful periods of your career, one of the most exciting, while at the same time you were writing television scripts and other things as well, are there any particular articles that you remember that gave you the greatest pleasure, or any particular initiatives of World Medicine that you look upon with pride and pleasure?

MOD Well, I think ... what I was proudest of at the time, and still am, was to actually demonstrate that if you're going to produce something about medicine, you didn't have to change your standards from the standards from if you're publishing about any other subject. In other words, that our editorial standards in terms of accuracy, literacy and everything else, and entertainment, and good writing, were exactly the same as those in Punch or The Listener and other publications of that ilk. That was one thing. The other thing was that I quite enjoyed developing the covers of World Medicine, which were very much my ... my thing. Mm, I enjoyed the fact that the people caught on to what it was trying to do. I mean, for instance, I remember Roy Calne wrote the first thing about cyclosporin, he put it in World Medicine because he wanted people to know about it, which of course would be frowned on now. And the fact that people like you would ... if I invited you, would actually write something, but that, but that [you] would write in the ... the spirit of the thing, and that somehow it became part of medicine. I mean in the early days, one of the technical ploys –the only person who ever spotted it was John Richardson actually, because he said it to me one day – was in the early days what I did was I used to go round to lots of the medical societies, the BMA local groups which were more, better attended in those days than they are now, I think, I used to go to their dinners, maybe two or three a week. I used to call it offering up my duodenum in sacrifice. But they, the reason for doing it was quite interesting. Because if I was performing after dinner – I regard it was a performance and therefore I didn't drink, still don't, but everybody else did. So I would sit there sober amongst all these jolly doctors, and just listen to what they were talking about. And these weren't necessarily what the BMJ said they were talking about. And then I would go back and use that in World Medicine. And that really was, I always remember Derek Stevenson, who was then the secretary of the BMA, once when I started off when I was, started criticising the GMC, saying that all I did was represent a handful of out-of-touch doctors.

JW Far from it.

MOD And the reason, you know, that my duodenum... As I said I'd eaten all that Aylesbury duckling and *bombe surprise*, which was the standard menu in those days, to show that it wasn't, it wasn't so. And John Richardson was the first person who spotted

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Foster, 'Putting on the Agony', *World Medicine*, vol 12 no 19, June 29 1977, 26-27.

that. He took me aside one day at the GMC, he said 'I know how, why you keep on being able to do this, because,' he said 'I've been tracking your ... your progress round the country!' So that was part of it. I was as, I was as pleased that *World Medicine*, it... I suppose my greatest pleasure in it was it was, reassured me that medicine was still a sort of civilised and ... a civilised profession, and that people, that there were, there were all sorts of talents allied to medicine that were still alive and well and thriving. And it's ... and it is still so, I think. I mean, I think medicine is the most marvellous general education for almost anything. Whatever I do now is based on what I did in medicine.

JW And a lot of people don't appreciate just how, what the range of opportunities is for people with a medical degree.

MOD Yeah.

JW Going back...

MOD The world!

JW The world, absolutely. We'll come to the GMC in a moment, but what was the, what was the reason in the end why your editorship came to a close?

MOD Well I..

JW There were a lot of rumours of that.

MOD Yeah, there were a lot of rumours. The ... the facts, as I know them, or as little as I know them, were ... after Max, when Max Geffen was, owned *World Medicine*, he allowed me to develop exactly what I wanted to do. I mean he was a marvellous proprietor. But then he sold out. And he sold out, he'd gone to launch it in England because he had an American version, a French version, *Medecine Mondiale*, but ours was, became different because I changed it, and he didn't mind a bit. So he sold out to, his share to McGraw-Hill, and half of it was, went to IPC, which was ... and between them, the biggest English and the biggest American publishers in the world really. And the only point at which these two giants met was in *World Medicine*, a tiny office tucked behind Leicester Square. And they each owned 50% of the equity, which was perfect, because neither of them could deal with me, and they were far too scared of one another to line up against me. And ... so, we thrived. And then two thing happened. Well, the main thing that happened was that round about 1980 we published a, an article that got a lot of coverage in the newspapers, and in, on television, in fact there was a *Panorama* made about it. Because we were the first people who blew the whistle on the Russians locking up dissidents and labelling them as schizophrenics. And we published the names and the histories, and we got the pictures of all these people, and a great deal of hard work, and we, so, about dissidents. And there was a meeting of the ... the International something of Psychiatry, in Moscow. So we published this and said 'When in Moscow ask what's happened to these people,' and we had six people on the cover. And that produced a great stir, and I remember I was working on a film at the time with Malcolm McDowell, actually led an – he was in the film *O Lucky Man*<sup>10</sup> - led a ... a group of people to the Russian embassy. So then about a year later, or maybe it was two years later, but sometime later anyway, Karl Sabbagh who was, wrote a

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<sup>10</sup> Michael O'Donnell was scientific adviser for *O Lucky Man* (1973).

regular column for *World Medicine*, who was a BBC television producer, who'd also then become director of the MSD Foundation...

JW Yes I remember. I followed him.

MOD And Karl wrote a regular column, and he wrote about a meeting that was going to be in Jerusalem I think it was, a similar meeting, and he said that psychiatrists or whoever it was going to this meeting should ask, as they'd asked in Russia about the names. And he gave the names for four Palestinian dissidents who'd been locked up without trial in Israel, and had disappeared. And this provoked a... I was out of the country at the time actually, I was in America, and I remember others had to deal with it in the office while I was away. And this provoked a huge response from ... the Jewish community in this, who saw it as a sort of anti-Jewish attack. It wasn't, it was a sort of anti-Israel attack, but these things just get lost, in a huge storm. And we got all these letters arrived, all of them virtually identical, so obviously it had sort of, with different names on them, which the, ah the office coped with very well. And then I came home and we coped with it very well. And, at the, this was just, it's important that you should know that was going on, because at the same time there was a great power struggle inside McGraw-Hill, in the ... United States. And Merck, Sharpe and Dohme, who'd been an advertiser in *World Medicine*, had once pulled out their advertising before because they'd objected to something that Paul Vaughan had written, on a matter of taste. And we'd out, all we'd done was, rather Richard Ingrams style, said 'We put it', we'd announced that they'd withdrawn their advertising, and it, but we were still rather pleased with the article, etcetera. So they'd been a bit itchy with us. And McGraw-Hill were having these internal ructions in the States, a power struggle. And Merck, Sharpe and Dhome then took up the ... the cause of the English Jewish doctors, and threatened McGraw-Hill that they were going to take out the advertising. And I said 'Well, they've done it before, and let them do it again.' So McGraw-Hill I think, probably thinking oh well, this is, this is too much hassle for us, they decided to sell their 50% of *World Medicine* to IPC. So we would then have one master. And, much in the way as happened later in the NHS and in the BBC, IPC, thinking they could control, immediately had ideas of how to manage it. And of course we were really an unmanageable collection of individuals. We worked, I mean I hired people that I thought were talented and liked, and got them to work in the office. And we didn't have protocols, or business plans and the rest of it. But we made them an awful lot of money. So they ... they decided to bring me to heel, I think, and said, we had this meeting when I was, and I said 'Well look, you make all this money out of us, we don't get any of it, and you don't have to do anything. Why do you complain? Why not just go on making all this money?' And I was accused of attacking the whole capitalist system! It was that sort of... So, and I said 'Well no, I don't think I am, really. But if, you know, this is kind of a delicate thing. You're a big organisation, you won't understand what's going on.' As, and as Jonathan Miller put it, what was it, 'They saw us as a, as a sort of...' ... a, what was it, 'a bureaucratic activity out of which a magazine came rather like an exhaust!'

JW I see, right, yes.

MOD Intense bureaucratic activity. However, that was that, and ... but nothing much happened. So, we sort of blundered... But they had the most bizarre ideas like moving our design department, amalgamating it with the metalwork magazines' design department. And again, without being arrogant about it, our ... we've actually had a BBC2 film made about how we did our cover designs, you know, a documentary about it, and it was something

rather special. And anyway, one Monday morning, they asked me to go down to their headquarters to discuss the future plans for *World Medicine*, and when I arrived there it was to be told to get out of my office by 4 o'clock that afternoon, which I did. And the rest of the staff left.

JW Indeed. And it really never picked up. They appointed a new editor, but then on it was downhill all the way, I'm afraid. Very sad, because it's a publication which I'm sure many of us miss, and I think you made a great success of it. Michael, let's turn now to...

MOD Sorry that was so long-winded.

JW Not a bit, not at all. I think it was fascinating.

MOD But it's a complex thing.

JW Fascinating. But I think it was more or less what some of us had learnt from you and others at the time, but it's good to have the whole story. Turning now to the GMC, you are notable in having been I think in three elections the doctor who received the greatest number of votes for election to the General Medical Council. I'm sure your life in *World Medicine* had a lot to do with it. Did you enjoy being on the GMC? Did you find it rewarding? Did you find it frustrating? Did you find it something where you felt you could make a major contribution?

MOD I found it a bit like all things at the same time! In the, in the end I suspect I made a contribution. I mean, I went... it's interesting, when I, when I resigned last year I went back to look at my, the notes for the very first speech I made at the GMC. And it's quite interesting that I had four, there were four things that I ... I suggested at the time. And by the time I'd left last year, which was sort of 26 years later or something, we'd actually done all four. The first one was to make it, to have an elected majority on it, so it would be more representative. The other one, which the GMC actually had under way at the time, was that we ought to treat doctors who were ill in a more civilised way. But in fact, the ... there were, there were plans for that. But I do remember the first disciplinary committee that I was on, somebody being sent out of the room, and another elected member, Tom Horner, saying 'Is that what we're going to do? We're just going to send him out?' And Lord Cohen said 'Well that's what we've got to do.' And he, Tom said 'Well, if I did that to a patient I would reckon to be had up in front of us,' in a very Irish way. So that was the other... The third thing was to ... to make, to turn that disciplinary procedure into more of a sort of tribunal, rather... As you remember, it was very much like a sort of court, with that awful dock that the doctor had to sit in. And the fourth thing was to get the GMC involved in matters of competence. It's now transmuted into performance, but... by that I meant the same thing.

JW Well so did I. And, but it all has taken, as it always does, a long time. Particularly because of the legal processes. And I think you were, if I may say so, during my time as president you were one of our most trusted and most admired contributors to debates.

MOD Well it's very kind of you to say so.

JW You really were(?).

MOD But I never... I mean I was terrified to start with.

JW So was I, so was I.

MOD I remember we both arrived about the same time, and I always remember [you], bless you, getting up and saying something once that I thought somebody ought to say. And I thought well if I say it I'll just demean it, because they'd disregard it as ... as a plot! And you got up, it was when we were all, it was when we were going to have a new president, do you remember that?

JW Yes I do.

MOD And we were all expected to stand for it. And I thought if I got up and said 'I don't really want to stand for president,' everyone would say 'Well, whoever thought that you would!'

JW Well, that's exactly, I remember it so well.

MOD But you got up, you got up and actually said it for us, and then we could all say 'And me, me!'

JW Quite. I remember that so well, Michael. I also remember when we were on the same committee to appoint a new registrar, where you misinterpreted I think at the time what my feelings were about the different candidates. And then in the end we both came up very sharply in favour of the same one, Peter Carrs(?).

MOD I can't, I can't remember... I can remember us coming up in harmony, I can't remember that I'd misinterpreted... Maybe I ... I thought you, I thought you were voting for somebody else or something.

JW Yes, you did, you did.

MOD Oh yes, how ... yes, I remember it now, now you've, now you've really...

JW You've been chairman of Standards Committee, one of the most important I think of the CMC's committees. Did you enjoy that?

MOD Yes, I... I mean that was the saddest thing about having to give up, because ... because I was just really getting into doing it, because it takes time to find out. And I'd managed to, I think, change the way in which the Standards Committee ran itself, and it seemed to be working. There were some marvellous people on it, and I allowed it, I suppose, a bit like *World Medicine*, I allowed people to have more time to ... much longer before we pooled the strands together. So ... yes, I regretted having to give up, really. But then-president Donald<sup>11</sup>, still president, was sort of, allowed us to do it. And I think probably the best thing I did on the GMC came at the end, was working on the

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<sup>11</sup> Donald Irvine CBE FRCD.

working party, very small working party, that produced that *Duties of a...*

JW ...of a Doctor.<sup>12</sup>

MOD ...*doctor*, which started with me writing, sitting down with an envelope and writing on the back of it what I would want my doctor to be. And it was only four... I think Charles George still has the original list that I wrote down, and he uses it talking to students. But that's, and that's, I thought that was rather nice that from that we actually developed something which I think is probably quite good.

JW Yes, I think it is, I think it is. And I think there has been a quite extraordinary, if tardy, move towards a much greater degree of openness and public accountability on the part of the GMC, even though many doctors don't accept it as fully as they might.

MOD It's difficult isn't [it] though...

JW It is.

MOD ...to ... because you've had to tread this path, you have...

JW Yes, absolutely.

MOD ...you have to carry all sort of different burdens at the same time.

JW Of course, of course. Now we must say a word or two about your very extensive and distinguished career as a broadcaster, not only on radio but in television. You've written television plays, you've had a number of TV series of your own, *O'Donnell Investigates* and many more. This has been obviously a most rewarding part of your career. Looking back, is there anything that you would regard as being your best work in this regard?

MOD Well I think... The best work that I've done are the novels that I've written, because I think they are, I mean you start a, they're 'story books' as Robert Robinson calls them. And they try and say things. I mean you just start from blank. The, in terms of medical things I think the, in the 1980s we tried to get over to a wider audience what was actually happening inside med-, in medicine, in a way, in terms of prevention, which I thought... And Richard Doll was marvellous, he, I used him on about five or six programmes. It was very funny that we hardly ever met, because somebody else would come up here to Oxford where we are now and interview him, and then I would talk in the studio as though we were in the same room. It's just the magic of television. But we did a whole series of those, which I think probably did a... Certainly the series we did on cancer, which changed it from, I mean turned it into a look at a group of diseases that seemed, that all masqueraded under the same name, and should be thought about separately, which I think was... We'd done research before that to see what cancer meant to people. And we based the ... the programmes very much on subverting the myths that people carried around about it, therefore that, you know, one cancer led to another and that smoking caused, was the cause of your breast cancer directly. And Richard Peto and Richard Doll were very good on it. So I was quite pleased with those. The other thing

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<sup>12</sup> In 1995 the GMC published *Duties of a Doctor*, a list delineating principles of good medical practice.

that, and I hinted at earlier on is that, about medicine being a marvellous education for everything else, is that, for instance, I'm quite pleased with the radio, a radio series I did, one of them, called *Relative Values*, which looks at contemporary family life. But there's no doubt that ... that the, that skill, any skill that I have as an interviewer derives from what I did as a doctor. I mean it's marvellous that I who, as you know, talk to a, could talk the hind legs off a donkey, verbose to a fault, that in those programmes I hardly say anything. I'm reverting back to a GP in the interview. And I remember a friend of both of us, Robin Steel, pointing out once that the difference between then and *The Psychiatrist's Chair* that Anthony Clare does is that mine are the 'GP drops in for a chat.' So I ... I'm quite proud of those programmes, because again they are something that didn't exist before. And I ... I suppose I enjoy, on *Stop the Week*, which I did for 13 years with Robert Robinson, I thought, I got lots of nice letters from doctors about that because it was, it was a chance to show that doctors weren't the stereotyped... I could put in, I could mention things about medicine, or behave in a way myself, that maybe doctors weren't expected to behave. But I enjoyed, I enjoy, I've got to this privileged position in life, as I said to you before we started this interview, where I only do things I enjoy doing now.

JW Well, privileged position but well deserved. Talking about Robert Robinson, I can't resist telling you an anecdote, because I met him at an encaenia in Oxford, about five or six years ago, and found him wearing this tie. And I said 'When did you serve in the Royal Army Medical Corps?' And he said 'I never had that privilege.' And he turned it over, and then he saw the back, and it was an RAMC tie which he'd just bought because he liked it.

MOD I've seen, I saw him, I had the same encounter with him! Oh I shall ... he never told me you'd done the same. I shall tell, I see him every week so I will...

JW Oh, you do? I see. So you're going to go on, no doubt, with these programmes as time goes by. And now you talk about *Relative Values* and you talk about family life, clearly you've had a very happy and fruitful marriage of 44 years duration approximately now. What about your family, your children? What are they up to?

MOD Well ... in order, I guess, I suppose it's better to do it in order of age.

JW Yes, indeed.

MOD My elder daughter is, had no notion of doing anything with medicine or science, went into work in ... in a solicitors' office, was doing whatever it is. But she went off on her own and she's now fantastically successful, runs a record company I think, and does things that I don't understand. But she's sort of, she's in her mid-thirties now, and is sort of, we used to call her the family yuppy, or her brother and sister did. But she's just a very successful businesswoman really, and nice with it.

JW And near you, somewhere, or...?

MOD No. She has, she's just, she discovered a pop group a year or two ago, so she was able to buy herself a rather nice house! And now she's, something else happened this year, I can't remember what, it wasn't a pop group this year. But anyway, it, she bought herself a house in Wimbledon not long ago.

JW Oh well, not too far.

MOD Not too far from me.

JW And the next one?

MOD The next one became a nurse, Lucy. Her great claim to fame is...

JW At Thomas'? A Nightingale?

MOD No, she didn't become a nightingale! Her great claim to fame was that she is actually the original 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,' that John Lennon's son, Julian, drew a picture of her when they were both at infant school together. And, so every time that the Beatles thing comes up she gets a cheque out of the BBC, because she's the... She's very altruistic, incredibly talented in caring for children with special needs, which I have to call them in her presence. And ... sadly, I mean she was running a unit in Chertsey for children with special needs, and of course when the cuts came it's the first thing that people save money on. So she ... she had to give that up. She was very hard up doing that. It's a reflection on our times; she went off and worked as a receptionist in an advertising agency, and earned in three months as much as she'd earned the previous year in... However, she then set up an agency for carers, for supplying people to children with special needs. And sadly she herself got psoriasis and then she got psoriatic arthritis, so she had to give up work. But... she's a great optimist. I mean she got married last year, her only bridesmaid was one of the autistic children that she looks after! A great day. So, but she's sort of happily married, and still, she's trying to do things, trying to galvanise the Psoriatic Association, Psoriasis Association, whatever it's called... So she's doing that and she's... And my son, who's much younger than the other two, is a sort of after, he's a jazz musician. He lives in an altruistic world, marvellous world.

JW What does he play?

MOD Saxophone.

JW Saxophone.

MOD And, well he's remained, he plays soprano and alto saxophone, alto mainly, but ... and clarinet again, and flute. He teaches a bit, and he's really... It's a world though, it's a bit like the world I started off in actually where you don't earn much money, my father's world, the wholly altruistic life, and they, and they love it. He loves it.

JW And again are they all within easy reach? Do you get together at Christmas, sometimes?

MOD We all get together much more often.

JW Much more often.

MOD I mean I'm, because I'm still, as far as my son is concerned I'm a patron of the arts in that I pay his rent! Literally. But no, they love coming to... We moved house when they, about ten or twelve years ago, into a small cottage, thinking we'd got rid of them. Of

course we haven't. They've all, they always come. Oh, no, and they have this mysterious network between them that if I'm away – and I'm not away often, all that often since my wife is ill –but whenever I was away for some mysterious reason one of them would suddenly say that they wanted to come down. They would know, and they didn't think my wife would like ... we live in a fairly remote place now. So, oh no, we're very close as a family, just as, I mean it, as I say right at the beginning my life is nothing to make a Penguin biography out of. I've had a happy childhood, loved school, loved university, had an enjoyable life. And my family; undivorced, happy children, we all know one another.

JW That's marvellous. So looking back upon this extraordinarily varied life in medicine and in other related topics, is there anything now that you would wish to have done differently or to have changed?

MOD Yes, I think, I think maybe ... the most important thing that I ever, that I've done in my life was that time in general practice, without any doubt. I mean I was a most useful citizen at that time. And obviously I remember all the awful mistakes that we all make as clinicians, and I would like to have done better by some patients than I did. Apart from that, no, I don't think so.

JW Good.

MOD I just think I've been very lucky.

JW Well, I think that the luck has been something that may have been part of it, but on the other hand you've worked extremely hard and you've been very effective at all the things you've done. So my congratulations to you, and it's been a pleasure to have talked to you today.

MOD Thank you very much, John.