

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Broadening the mind



BRIDGET FARHAM

bfarham@samedical.org

ugqirha@iafrica.com

CME is published monthly by the South African Medical Association Health and Medical Publishing Group

Private Bag X1, Pinelands, 7430

(Incorporated Association not for gain.

Reg. No. 05/00136/08).

Correspondence for CME should be addressed to the Editor at the above address.

Tel. (021) 530-6520

Fax (021) 531-4126

E-mail: publishing@samedical.org

Head Office:

PO Box 74789, Lynnwood Ridge, 0040

Tel. (012) 481-2000

Fax (012) 481-2100

The writer, Elizabeth Drew, said 'Too often travel, instead of broadening the mind, merely lengthens the conversations'. The rise of international travel over the past few decades has been enormous, both for pleasure and for business. One of the results of the increasingly wealthy and leisured classes in the West, has been an interest in seeing other parts of the world. And globalisation has of course contributed greatly to international business travel. What will happen over the next few decades as the price of oil continues to rise and global security becomes increasingly insecure is anybody's guess.

Tourism, as a mass activity, is a relatively new phenomenon. As far as I am aware, it was only after the industrial revolution in Europe that the monied classes started exploring countries other than their own. The 'Grand Tour' of British Victorians is a case in point. Wealthy individuals with time on their hands flocked to the cultural sights of Europe, armed with their Baedekers guide books and a rudimentary knowledge of the local languages. Large hotels and small pensions sprang up to accommodate them. There is no mention in the literature of the time of any medical problems associated with such travel, although it is unlikely that these early travellers escaped strange food and water without any ill effects.

On a different scale, this was also the time of exploration and early colonisation of far distant lands such as Africa. Explorers like Speke and Livingstone disappeared for years at a time and often died abroad. The dangers of the newly opened areas of Africa were well known and few white people easily survived the strange diseases and difficult climate.

Why do people travel? Having lived in the UK I can understand how the average person, living in a grey, semi-detached house in a grey climate must long for sun and sand and these same people make an annual pilgrimage to areas where these are to be found. Recently, as the Asian tsunami disaster demonstrated so graphically, such people have been venturing rather further than the Costa del Sol, although they are essentially looking for the same thing. But what exactly is it that drives people to travel? Curiosity is probably the greatest trigger, although we all know plenty of people who fit the quotation above. Travel certainly only broadens the mind if the person is open to new experiences and ideas. Too often, a foreign holiday is simply a continuation of normal experience in a sunny place with different food! I often wonder if people realise how odd tourism must seem to the ordinary people in the undeveloped countries that they visit – even though often tourism is their only means of livelihood in a world where money has become all important. When pristine areas of the world, and our own country is no exception, are taken over by property developers in the name of tourism and its revenues, it is time to wonder whether all this international travel is actually good for the planet.

But, international travel is, for the moment at least, a fact of life and, as such, travel medicine is an increasingly important specialisation. Steven Toovey and his team have put together an excellent mini-textbook on the subject in this edition. It should remain on your shelves for some time. Enjoy the read.