



She was the shyest person; small, dark, intense, and the wife of a senior medical colleague in town. She enjoyed singing in the choir, being involved in make-up for the amateur dramatic society and was a competent artist. I was honoured to be asked to take over her care. She reported that her husband had provided all her medical care for the preceding 40 years and it was time for someone else to be involved. Initially she was seen for relatively minor and easily managed problems. Then she presented with melaena and bruising on her arms and legs without history of injury. Urgent blood investigations revealed anaemia and a prothrombin index greater than 12. She was admitted to the regional hospital. When I saw her a few days later, she was extremely angry. She strongly denied the accusation from the physicians that she was ingesting her husband's warfarin. Yes, she did despise her husband; he was such a hypocrite. He would be so attentive to his patients in person, but so disparaging behind their backs and he was pathetic with money and had kept her and their large brood in a tiny house for years. However she was not depressed and had no desire to die. She had not taken his warfarin! I believed her, although her anger against my respected colleague was completely unexpected and revealed major unresolved issues.

Specialist haematologist input was arranged. Further episodes of acute GIT bleeding occurred with two more admissions. Eventually it became clear

that she would require daily IV vitamin K injections. She was discussed at an international conference. Each time the assessment was that she had to be ingesting a rat poison; probably one of the long acting agents that have supplanted warfarin in rodent control. I wondered if someone else could be poisoning her. Possibly her husband? Should I speak with the police? I felt constrained about discussing the issues with my medical colleagues as they knew everyone involved. She was my first patient every working day for her IV injection. I had to go to their home to inject her on public holidays. The relationship did not progress. I never got to know her at all.

One morning her husband caught her adding brodifacoum to her yoghurt. This was precisely the sort of long acting rat poison which it had long been suspected that she was taking. She said that after so many accusations over the months, she had decided to see what it would be like. She promised not to take it any more. Psychiatry input was refused, although the advice of a psychiatrist was obtained. A psychologist would be more acceptable. He was never able to be confident that she had stopped ingesting the rodenticide. The IV vitamin K continued. The haematologist suggested that I teach her to self inject and this was achieved. Her INR was regularly tested and she appeared to be self injecting reliably. It was expected that if she stopped taking the

This is a column written from the swamp. The term is taken from the book by Donald Schon<sup>1</sup> where he talks about the crisis of confidence in professional knowledge thus:

*In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solutions.*

1. Schon DA. Educating the reflective practitioner. Jossey-Bass Publishers 1990.

## Contributions

We invite amusing contributions to this column which should be relevant to the swamp and not more than 600 words.

poison her vitamin K requirements would drop after approximately three months. They did not drop.

She was found dead in the toilet on a Saturday morning. A postmortem showed a large cerebellar bleed. Toxicology eventually confirmed the ongoing presence of brodifacoum. The coroner returned a verdict of accidental death as it seemed improbable that she had intended to kill herself while continuing to inject the antidote. The family were spared publicity, but were frustrated as they wanted some answers. I was unable to provide any for them or for myself.