

ARA DARZI MD

Mr Chancellor,

Following your excellent advice, I have become a regular reader of “The Hansard”. Now available on-line, this can be (at least sometimes), a real page-turner. “The Hansard” is the verbatim report of the proceedings of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and during my recent musings, one particular entry stood out. It related to a new member of the Lords, who was presenting his first Bill to the Upper Chamber. He had recently been invited by Gordon Brown to join the Government as a Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department of Health.

Unfortunately, the first reading did not go to plan. Whilst questioning the new Health Minister, a senior member of the Lords collapsed on the spot ... suddenly ... and whilst in full-flow. The proceedings came to an abrupt and dramatic halt - he had lost consciousness, and the situation was life-threatening.

Fortunately, the Health Minister knew exactly what to do. He acted decisively, immediately ... and even without discussing it with the Secretary of State. He promptly resuscitated the senior peer on the floor of the House of Lords.

Now, although some would consider this a “baptism of fire”, for Professor Lord Darzi of Denham, this was very much “part of

the day job”. In one fell swoop he demonstrated all of the skills that make him a leading international figure in Medicine and Surgery: a sharp intellect, but practical; acting incisively, and, above all, with the patient always at the very centre of his attention. These are the characteristics that have driven his clinical, academic, and political career – and also his public service.

Ara Darzi was born in Iraq to Armenian parents displaced by the 1915 genocide. At 17 years of age he emigrated to Ireland to study medicine, began a career in Surgery, and demonstrated his academic prowess in obtaining a higher degree with commendation from Trinity College Dublin. Early in his career he was tempted across the Irish Sea to gain one-year of surgical experience in England, and, fortunately for us, he never returned.

As a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, the then Mr Darzi became a pioneer of minimally invasive, or “key-hole” surgery. Having been appointed as a Consultant Surgeon when barely out of his 20s, he embarked upon a research career harnessing image-guidance systems and robotics to improve surgical techniques. This gained him the prestigious nick-name of “robo-doc”.

At a time when the molecular and cell biology of disease became the main focus of surgical research, Ara Darzi concentrated on

refining surgical technique. He also developed the application of virtual reality systems to help train other surgeons and evaluate surgical practice – thus spreading his skills across the whole profession.

Surgical precision and maintaining excellent standards were his priority. And in doing so, he has championed surgery in an increasingly physician-centred medical world. In the words of one leading London clinical academic (and you will have to excuse the pun) “he, almost single-handedly, ensured that the craft of British surgery remained at the cutting edge of modern medicine”.

Innovation has become a fashionable word in recent years, but throughout his clinical and academic career, Lord Darzi has remained at the forefront of medical discovery with very practical benefits for his patients. His open mind and flexible intellect have enabled him to engage and harness diverse technologies, including biotechnology, information systems, engineering and physical sciences. And why is this so important? Because, despite massive international investment in high-profile initiatives such as the “Human Genome Project”, molecular medicine has yet to deliver major improvements in health care. But as in Lord Darzi’s own words: “surgery has saved more lives from cancer than any other treatment”.

He was appointed to the chair of Surgery at Imperial College London, and knighted by the queen in 2002 for his services to medicine and surgery. You might, therefore, be tempted to think of him as a modern day Sir Lancelot Spratt – moving from bed to bed with an entourage of young students, peering over half-moon spectacles and talking “over the patient’s head”, using jargon about the technical finesse of his novel techniques ... and his exceptional surgical outcomes ... but nothing could be further from the truth. Unlike Sir Lancelot, for Lord Darzi, the patient has always been the focus of his attention - whether in the clinic, in the operating theatre, or the House of Lords.

As a surgeon, his leadership was based firmly on a “hands-on” experience of London’s teaching hospitals, where he started to shape clinical services beyond his own speciality through his involvement in the NHS Modernisation Board. He was therefore the natural choice for Gordon Brown when the time came for a radical reconfiguration of the Health Service in London.

NHS London invited him to develop “A Framework for Action” to meet the health care needs of Londoners over the next decade. In parallel, he published national guidelines on day care surgery, whilst setting the future model for Diagnostic Treatment Centres (or polyclinics as they have become known). Mr Chancellor, I know that you believe that his strategic vision was light-years ahead of its time, and with the “Next Stage

Review” he has ensured that “Quality is the organising principle of the NHS”.

And how has he done this? It has only been possible because Ara Darzi has enfranchised all health care professionals (and not just doctors) in the shaping of health care services. He has made all staff accountable for the £110 billion health care budget, and he has enabled real choice for patients and families who can now seek the best treatments possible. He believes that this can be done without necessarily increasing costs – especially if appropriate resources are directed towards disease prevention.

In Britain we have long been proud of our National Health Service, but we have seen small cracks appearing over recent years, with increasing demands on an over-stretched resource. However, as Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Lord Darzi has played a major role in moving us from its inception in 1948, into the new millennium. And as a result, the British people are united in sustaining a state-funded health-care system well into the future.

Mr Chancellor, several personality traits shone through when Lord Darzi was recently interviewed by Kirsty Young on the BBC Radio 4 programme “Desert Island Discs”. Being proud of his roots, he chose music from his native Armenia, and he fondly remembered the foundations of his medical and surgical

career with “Finnegan’s Wake” performed by the Dubliners. “Don’t Give Up” by Peter Gabriel certainly reflects his dogged determination, and “The Logical Song” by Supertramp reveals his scientific approach to the most complex problems. However, when he described his one chosen luxury for the desert island, I was very surprised. Surely a vocational surgeon would select a scalpel?

No, Mr Chancellor, Ara Darzi would prefer a “pencil and paper” ... and as for his one book ... he would choose “Yes Minister”.

Perhaps during his time on the desert island he would reflect on his time spent at the Department of Health, and use these items to great effect..... by writing the sequel to “Yes Minister”. Being about the Department of Health, you, Mr Chancellor, would surely appear as a character? It is interesting to reflect on which particular one you would replace!

Mr Chancellor, Professor Lord Ara Darzi has brought the NHS back to the people. He has paved the way for a health care system led from the grass-roots, by professionals and patients. Because of him, we can rightly boast about our sustainable health care model to our transatlantic colleagues, which remains “free at the point of need”.

Thus, in recognition of his major contribution to surgery and medicine, and for prescribing the preventative medicine which

has prepared our National Health Service for a healthy future,
I ask that you bestow upon him the degree of Doctor of
Medicine, honoris causa.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery