

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Passing of a dear friend

Dr. John Boyd died peacefully on July 15, 2023, after a long illness. I've known him – or, as hard as it is to write this, I now should say I knew him for 46 years – since first meeting in Edmonton back in 1977. He was a busy obstetrician/gynecologist with a practice out of the University Hospital working with Jimmy Barr. He delivered our Feonagh and Callum.

He'd worked in Winnipeg as a research fellow in Jack Bowman's anti-rhesus immunoglobulin research program before coming to Edmonton – an experience that allowed him to save a good few lives administering intra-uterine anti-rhesus immunoglobulin intra-peritoneally to the baby.

But I know John would prefer to be remembered not for his obstetrical and gynecological expertise or his welcoming approach to student teaching and reassuring bedside manner but for his humanity, his sense of kindly humour, his repartee, his joy of music, oh, and perhaps his golf.



John Boyd truly was the master raconteur of story and its delivery. He had that rare and cherished gift of exquisite timing that holds the listener in suspense until the final line (photo credit: Marvin Polis).

My first meeting with John was not related to medicine or obstetrics but was a social occasion at the Boyds' famous house on Aspen Drive – that's the one that still has the Easter Island stone head statue at the corner of the front garden staring mysteriously over the Whitemud Ravine.

I can't remember what the reason for this meeting was – it may have been a wedding or an engagement party, but I do recall my surprise and pleasure at John laughing heartily at a joke I told which was to me an old, old story but to my delighted surprise he had not heard before. It was that old chestnut about the direct relationship between a couple's wedding night experiences and the number of oysters consumed at the preceding wedding feast and how some of the oysters didn't seem to function as they should. There then followed a blizzard of amusing stories, jokes and anecdotes that formed the foundation of a friendship of humour and laughter over the next 46 years.

For John truly was the master raconteur of story and its delivery, an art in public speaking which seems to have become diminished in status in the last few decades. He had that rare and cherished gift of exquisite timing that holds the listener in suspense until the final line is delivered clearly and impeccably, with the serious face and voice tone held for a second or two before breaking into a chuckle showing he was as delighted as you were with the story.

I asked him once if he practiced the art of delivery. After chastising me for questioning his training as an obstetrician in Glasgow (a place second only to Dublin for clinical experience in the range of human oddities, tragedies and quirks in the magnitude of births and deliveries), he explained that he did. John always called jokes "stories."

"The night before any speech, I quietly go over what I'm going to say – the order, the words and nuances, and for stories, emphasizing in my memory the sequential build-up to the important punch line."

That explanation doesn't cut it. It's a gift; some have it and most don't. I don't, but perhaps occasionally can rise to it – mostly by accident. John had a special way of cocking his head to the left as his story progressed, and his head would be set straight as the punch line or final point was made.

But it was in his membership of the Edmonton Burns Club that I recall John's most enjoyable moments and his memorable repartee. Canada is not a country world-renowned for humour. It's said to be chronically irony-deficient, and this deficiency sadly only seems to be getting worse.

On one occasion in Calgary, one week before the Big Night (Robbie Burns Night) on January 25, our guest speaker coming in from Scotland cancelled at the last minute due to illness, and we had 800 guests who were expecting a high-quality evening of poetry, song and revelry, without the main act of the performance. I contacted John, and he immediately drove down to Calgary, agreeing to give the main toast to "The Immortal Memory."

Nothing could have gone better. It was January 2004, and guests at that dinner still fondly recall the occasion. After being introduced as a prominent obstetrician and gynecologist with a large practice in Edmonton and area, John stood up, slowly walked to the lectern, stood there and gazed out at the audience who were sitting at their tables gazing back at him; with a sigh of relief, he uttered three words: "Thank goodness ..."

faces.” The laughter continued for a minute, and the guests had to be cautioned with shouts of “order, order please.”

There began a masterly speech with 15 minutes of “stories” then a sudden switch to the importance of following the advice of Robert Burns on mitigating the common miseries – loss of employment, loss of friends and family, loss of your home – and vigorously opposing man’s incessant inhumanity to man.

Then there was the golf tee – in fact all golf tees were platforms for John’s stories. Most saw them as an enjoyable part of the game with John. Others darkly suggest it was a kind of diversionary tactic to befuddle opponents’ focus on their game. A member at the Mayfair who will remain un-named told me that on one occasion, the flow of Boyd stories on the driving tee was such that not only was the foursome convulsed with laughter most of the time on each tee, but their group received a warning letter from the club secretary regarding complaints of “slow golf” from groups behind. Ah well, the Mayfair has always determinedly held on to its reputation as the second best golf course in Edmonton.

John was always a big supporter of women’s rights. I remember him telling me that in general he believed that women understood the important things in life so much more than men did; women were better managers and better leaders.

His writing expertise was recognised by CBC’s Sunday morning program hosted by Michael Enright, where his essay *The demise of the pocket handkerchief* was broadcast to the country on April 20, 2018 (and has been picked up and read in the USA, the UK and Australia). John’s salty, whimsical paean was broadcast to a rasping, Kleenex-addicted audience and also [featured in Alberta Doctors’ Digest](#).

Then there was the music. When I worked in Edmonton at the Cross Cancer Institute in the ‘80s, we had a fine band of minstrel friends. In the line-up was TK Lee (former AMA President, internist, guitar/ vocals); Derald Oldring (ENT surgeon, trumpet); John Boyd (obstetrician/gynecologist, double bass); Don Bouie (colorectal surgeon, piano/ keyboard); the late Norman Davies (cardiologist, drums); and me (oncologist, vocals/ guitar/fiddle.) We also had appearances from then-medical students Sid Viner (intensivist, medical administrator, drums) and Doug Strilchuk (family doctor, alto sax). We played mainly at medical dances but had a few gigs at other venues.

I do recall the excitement when we gelled as a band and hit the groove – that exhilarating moment of realizing you’re really playing together. The audience picks up on that and then the dancing really starts.

John was a poet, and we collaborated on a book called *Rude Ragged Rhymes* (printed by Colleaguecopyshop.com). Here’s one of John’s using the apt metaphor of life’s railway station.

Wisdom in the snow

In our garden below, carved out of snow,
Two snow-folk were fashioned with pride.
A tall round fellow, with a smile so mellow,
And his snow lady by his side.

But this smiling pair, were sadly aware,
And troubled thoughts tumbled within.
Winter's cold blast, will not ever last,
All things melt with the coming of Spring.

"I know it will come,' said his snow-white chum,
"But I'm only a little downhearted,"
And she added with glee, "I'm going to be free"
From this old carrot's smell at last parted!"

We all of us stand, some hand in hand,
On the platform of life's railway station.
Where trains await, some early some late.
For that final unknown destination.

So be like our snowmen, who face their dread omen.
Of that last inevitable trip.
Don't let it niggle, have a wee giggle,
And from Memory's big jug take a sip!

- J J Boyd, October 2019

Rest in Peace, John, dear old friend.

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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