

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Learn from the past. Don't cancel it!

There has been an invigorating and welcome movement to address racism and past racial injustices in the Western world (a movement noticeably absent in other planetary regions). Evidence of racism affecting medical outcomes, especially in Indigenous and Black communities, must be addressed. This complex issue will not be as simple as it sounds, but good will come of it.

However, there has also been a movement to modify history, sometimes extending back hundreds of years.

Revisionist “presentism” and its problems

“Presentism” is a recent phenomenon – an attitude toward the past dominated by a present-day perspective – its assumed *raison d'être* being that one can knowledgeably look back a few years or even hundreds of years and judge people's words, beliefs and actions in the light of current beliefs. It presumes that the accused's sins, especially now the sin of racism, cancel out virtues and achievements.

The relevance of all this to physicians and surgeons is that some of the heroes who contributed greatly to medical practice – such as the clinical researchers from years ago who studied patients and treatments without written informed consent (e.g. Dr. Edward Jenner or Dr. James Lind) – are under scrutiny from so-called “cancellers.” These also include a Canadian hero, Dr. William Osler, who is accused of racism in some of his private letters.

When an original observer points out something unfair from the past at personal risk to his/her reputation or safety – this is courageous. Later amplifiers of the observation (these days usually on Twitter) are not always so brave.

The Glasgow “Cone Heid” statue

In the city of Glasgow, Scotland, there is a fine “A-listed” [statue of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington](#), on horseback, erected in 1844 outside the Museum of Modern Art. Many of the soldiers enlisted in Wellington's campaigns in Spain, France and Belgium came from Scotland, including the famous regiment of the thundering charge: the Scots Greys at Waterloo (which even Napoleon observed as “magnifique” before his Imperial Guard was pushed back.)

In the early 1980s, a traffic cone set at a jaunty angle appeared on the statue's head. Council workers took it down. But each time they removed the cone, it re-appeared within a few days. By 1990, the council gave up removing it. I chuckled when I first saw it. It has become part of the Visit Glasgow itinerary on *TripAdvisor*. Locals call it “The Cone-Heid” statue (translation: “The Traffic Cone on Wellington's Head” statue).

It is now generally, if reluctantly, accepted by Glaswegians with a shoulder shrug as a mischievous way of poking fun at the pompousness of the Iron Duke's statue, who being

human, would have faults as well as virtues and whose fortune was burnished from the deaths of many of his soldiers. Many believe Wellington himself, known to joke with his men, would “get it.” The *Lonely Planet* guide lists the statue in its “top 10 most bizarre monuments on Earth”

To my warped mind, this qualifies as pawky non-vandalism – speaking to the complex nature of erecting statues to individuals whose star might well change over the centuries. The Cone Heid statue may elicit a chuckle from an observer (though not from Wellington’s infantry facing Boney’s revenge charging imperial guard.)

Do we need statues?

So do we need statues to individuals anyway, however heroic, however loved? Homo Sapiens tends to lionize well-known people and celebrities. We all have our heroes who may well become tainted by some change in values. At some point in the ebb and flow and the heave and heft of history, some of the famous or merely celebrated will come to represent something forgotten, unfashionable, or hated. Should they then be moved, beheaded or buried in a museum?

Ramses II, in Shelley’s poem, crumbling yet preserved in the sand, still serves as a reminder of the tides of history and the absurdity of Ramses’ arrogance:

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

We’re all poor sinners. All of us have done or will do things which we profoundly regret. In judging the value of maintaining a statue or a building’s name there has to be a balance – does the good outweigh the bad?

Protests are a feature of life in a democratic society with robust freedom of speech. My father used to take me to The Mound in Edinburgh to listen to box podium blusterers – crackpots vilifying Roman Catholics, foreigners, English, Glaswegians or police – but most frequently, the Pope!

The sparse crowd were there for free entertainment, listening to the spluttering with cheers and jeers. This was the bottom of the barrel of our freedom of speech liberty, a liberty one must accept for more serious free speech issues. Better to have these outbursts expressed than bottled up when they might result in a more violent expression.

The current protest movements of a variety of groups are giving voice to many injustices. We’re so lucky to live in a democracy with free speech – try going to China and “cancelling” Chairman Mao as a murderer of thousands in his cultural revolution.

What should be a reasonable response to what some refer to as “cancel culture?”

“Here are thy bounds and here shall thy vibrations cease.” Robert Peel (Liberal Conservative commenting on radicalism)

As always there is no simple general answer. Removal of King Leopold II’s statue from the centre of Antwerp to a museum was a good decision given the depredations that occurred in the Congo under his tutelage. There are others where the balance of good and bad falls on the wrong side.

In decisions about re-naming or removal of many other statues, a fair process is required. All who have a legitimate interest in a serious decision should be allowed a vote. In universities, this includes not only current undergraduates but also past graduates and staff. It’s laborious but required. In lesser decisions, a placard outlining the life and times of the person, their contributions to the betterment of the society together with an account of problems in the context of the times.

Dialogue and positive action is the answer, not disfiguring statues, re-naming and cancelling the past. A full public discourse on how we wish to honor important moments in history might be undertaken. We must learn from the past, not blot it out.

Alternatively, you can always put a traffic cone on a statue’s head.