

## *Dear Tom*

Trisha Greenhalgh

Next week, you will be six years old. When I was your age, I already knew I wanted to become a doctor.

I went to medical school at Cambridge, where I learnt a lot of clever things about the human body. In Michaelmas term, 1978, we covered the anatomy, physiology and pathology of the brain. We dissected out parts with strange names like hippocampus and globus pallidus. We memorised the routes of all the tiny blood vessels that run in a chain around something called the Circle of Willis. We read about watershed zones and Berry aneurysms, and looked down microscopes at haemorrhagic and ischaemic infarcts.

A couple of years later, on a community medicine attachment, we studied the epidemiology of stroke. We talked about hypertension, smoking, diabetes, and thromboembolic disease, and we noted with some relief that the odds are stacked heavily against the elderly and those who are already ill. On our geriatric medicine firm, we admitted old people with strokes (declaring them "boring"), and once or twice, reluctantly, accompanied them on trips to the physiotherapy department.

In 1986, I took an important examination and was pleased that my long case was a stroke patient. My ability to locate the pathological lesion precisely in the left posterior inferior cerebellar artery from a meticulous assessment of which parts of the body the patient could still feel and move earned me the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians. The examiners congratulated me for knowing so much about strokes.

Tom, I am ashamed to say I believed them. Yet it was not until today that I learnt the most elementary lesson about cerebrovascular disease. When the choir had finished singing 'Abide With Me' and the congregation was sitting in deep reflective silence, your daddy picked you up and carried you to the coffin, and your faltering words, "Bye-bye mummy" echoed round the

little chapel, I finally understood some basic truths about this devastating condition.

If you ever go to medical school, Tom, tell the professors and lecturers to add a few facts to the core curriculum on the pathology of the human brain. Remind them to tell the students that cerebrovascular accidents are cruel and unfair, that they leave relationships broken and children motherless, and that the so-called risk factor profile often provides no satisfactory answers to the question, "why him?", "why her?" or "why me?"

Tell them that nature does not always protect the young, and that the task of rebuilding shattered lives is made no easier by a detailed knowledge of which vessel happened to burst on which side of the brain. Stroke prevention campaigns as currently formulated, even though based on the best available research evidence and using cost-effectiveness calculations that attach great value to the lives of people like your mummy, would not have saved her.

Meanwhile, Tom, I will copy this letter to the men and women of medical science. I will remind them that although they have made great strides in their research activities so far, there is no place for complacency when 5000 people of childbearing age still die or become seriously disabled from cerebrovascular disease in the UK every year.

*Tom's mother died of a stroke in March 1998.*

