

A funny thing happened on the way to a conference – and other stories

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A woman in a man's world

BY VALERIE LUND

Being one of the few women professors of surgery in the world for most of my career inevitably led to some amusing situations. When I was first invited to the Middle East in the 1990s, I accepted primarily to see what would happen and to obtain a guaranteed source of dinner-party anecdotes. After the initial debacle of getting the visa from their embassy as an unaccompanied female, it became quite clear that they would cope by reassigning me to the male gender, as I metamorphosed into 'Mr Lund' on arrival. I had made it clear with the organisers that I would be wearing Western clothes (albeit respectable ones) so I should not have been surprised to have a large flower display moved to impede a view of my ankles by the audience; indeed one was almost flattered that one's legs could provoke such an effect. At the evening party on a beach, where the other (male) invited speakers sat cross-legged on carpets, I had my own small gold chair and was filmed throughout the evening sitting on my chair like an early Warhol installation, even when my compatriots were forced to take part in the all-male folk dancing. Sir Thomas Beecham's advice that "one should try anything once, except folk dancing and incest" again came to mind as distinguished but discomforted doyens of ENT were forced to whirl around on the sand, brandishing sticks – a spectacle that is difficult to forget.

On leaving the hotel at the end of a memorable stay, we decided that it would be amusing to take some photos in the foyer with me carrying the suitcases a respectful distance behind one of my colleagues. During this exercise, we noticed that a gentleman was standing at reception wearing only a white towel and our photographer, a well-known Scottish ENT professor, decided to take a surreptitious picture of the gentleman whilst pretending to photograph us. Inevitably, he was spotted and, as the man marched determinedly towards us, we thought our departure would now be in doubt. Instead, he warmly extended a hand and announced that he was a local ENT doctor going on pilgrimage and graciously said that he would be pleased to have his photograph taken. We were, of course, very embarrassed.

A couple of years later I accepted an invitation to the same country, feeling more at ease as to what was expected; things had not changed at all. Indeed, during the gala banquet at which I was a guest of honour, a waiter bearing an uncanny resemblance to Manuel in *Fawlty Towers**, tried to prevent me from sitting at the top table, indicating my place was with the other women behind a wooden screen. As I fixed him with a steely glint and wagged my finger to ensure I had his full attention whilst disabusing him of this notion, the organisers

realised an international incident was unfolding and the waiter was unceremoniously removed from the room.

Of course, being in the minority gender abroad was not confined to the Middle East. In Taiwan, I understood how Margaret Thatcher must have sometimes felt when, at a dinner of a dozen elderly ENT professors, I was the only woman. As the toasts of plum brandy continued, I was able to rely on the East Asian alcohol aldehyde dehydrogenase** to literally drink my hosts under the table as each in turn slumped onto it, leaving me the last 'man' standing.

In Japan, where only my high heels amongst the gentlemen's shoes left outside our little curtained restaurant booth indicated that a woman was present, I watched eminent senior surgeons become 'tired and emotional' on quite modest amounts of sake. The situation has, of course, changed and, for some time in countries such as Russia, Malaysia or the Philippines, women ENT surgeons have outnumbered the men, so drinking competitions have happily become a distant memory.

* *Fawlty Towers* was a popular television series in the 1970s written by John Cleese and set in an English seaside hotel. One of the principal characters, usually the butt of many jokes, was Manuel, a loveable but incompetent Spanish waiter, memorably played by Andrew Sachs.

** Many people in China, Korea and Japan suffer from a specific aldehyde dehydrogenase deficiency. This leads them to become drunk quite quickly, often associated with facial flushing, but also allows them to recover more quickly than their western counterparts.

This series of stories is dedicated to those of you with whom some of these moments were shared (or endured) and, above all, to my amazing and long-suffering husband, David Howard. Most of you know him as an exceptional head and neck surgeon but, since Covid, he has been involved in a large multi-speciality international charitable project reintroducing negative pressure non-invasive breathing support which could transform the management of respiratory disease all round the world. If you are interested, please visit www.exovent.org (or scan the QR code) for further information and, if you enjoy the stories, please consider donating to the charity through the Exovent website (Click DONATE on the home page drop down menu).



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