

FERGUS WALSH DCL

Mr Chancellor,

As you know better than anyone else, health is a topic in which absolutely everybody has a keen interest. Yet few of us have the appropriate educational background to allow us to wrestle competently with the crucial details: when all is said and done, human biology is extremely complex and the knowledge and practices of the medical profession are necessarily highly technical in nature. Most of us have little choice than to rely on expert advice. Frustratingly, this expert advice is often transmitted using the vocabulary of the experts themselves. Take the case of the text message I received from a friend recently:

“Just got back from the hospital. They reckon I might have pneumo-brancho-pulmono-sclerosi-filia-thoraci-cardiosis...

... but it's hard to say!”

Into the gulf between expert and confused citizen steps Fergus Walsh. Like most of us, Fergus has no medical training – he graduated in English Literature from Leeds University in 1983 – but, unlike most of us, he is blessed with a penetrating intellect coupled to

a great gift for clarity of expression. Over the last few years, Fergus has done more than any other journalist to facilitate public comprehension of the most challenging health issues of our times. This has not always earned him compliments – his recent exposés on the swine flu pandemic led one wag to dub him “the Robert Peston of phlegm” – but it has earned him a highly appreciative following which, tellingly, includes in its burgeoning ranks both leading medical practitioners and people from all walks of life who simply seek straight answers to important questions.

Fergus surely inherited the gift of the gab from his late parents, Michael and Ita, who were both natural raconteurs in the finest Irish tradition. They migrated to England in the 1950s, with Michael stepping off the boat with only two shillings and sixpence in his pocket. Michael was fond of Benjamin Franklin’s axiom:

“For the best return on your money, pour your purse
into your brain; once there, no-one can take it from
you”.

Years of hard manual work and nurturing by Michael and Ita ensured that their four children all benefitted greatly from their pursuit of this principle.

After completing a post-graduate diploma in radio journalism at Falmouth, Fergus began freelancing for BBC local radio. Within weeks he had done his first report for BBC Radio 4's Six O' Clock news. After a couple of years, Fergus was recruited to the network radio newsroom at Broadcasting House. He was soon assigned as a reporter to BBC Breakfast News, which entailed twelve-hour nightshifts, two weeks on, one week off. He had the good fortune to share this gruelling phase of his career with Charlie Lee-Potter. Bonded through shared adversity, Charlie and Fergus are now true "compadres", as Fergus is godfather to Charlie's daughter Mia, while Charlie is godmother to Fergus' son Hugo.

Warm, genuine and loyal is how Fergus' friends and family describe him. But journalism is not a profession in which these character traits can always be displayed. As Fergus has himself commented:

“You have to keep a certain emotional distance from the events in front of you; otherwise it would be impossible to report objectively. You can care deeply about whom or what you are covering, but you must not let your feelings cloud your judgment or prevent you from being an independent observer. On controversial topics, you have to play devil's advocate and ask people direct and often difficult questions”.

Yet Fergus manages to live up to this challenge without ever losing his humanity; he is noted for talking to people in a very natural way, creating a convivial atmosphere which helps others open up and be frank. Somehow, he also manages to wed deep sensitivity to steely tenacity, which is a major asset in any investigative journalist.

Charlie Lee-Potter recalls an incident when Fergus was the BBC's Home Affairs Correspondent in the late 1980s. The police had erected steel barriers outside the Old Bailey to prevent journalists talking to people leaving the building. Knowing that the police had no right to do so in this instance, Fergus muttered "I'm not having this", then deftly pushed the steelwork aside, walked calmly past the bemused police officers, and got on with his job as a journalist.

Fergus moved on to become the BBC's Health Correspondent between 1993 and 2000, before spending four years as Science Correspondent. This background fitted him perfectly for the role he has now occupied for five years, as the BBC's Medical Correspondent, with lead responsibility for reporting medical research and global disease threats. In this capacity, Fergus has travelled extensively, reporting on such diverse topics as HIV/AIDS in Malawi, polio in Nigeria, leprosy in India, child poverty and health in Bangladesh, bird flu in Vietnam and Turkey, swine flu in Australia and obesity in the United States. His reporting on various aspects of genetics research, including that with embryonic stem cells, displayed such a grasp of the issues that he was asked to give oral evidence to the Joint Parliamentary Committee examining the Human Tissues and Embryos Bill in June 2007.

In January this year Fergus put one foot across the border between journalist and thespian when he appeared as himself in the BBC1 drama "A Short Stay in Switzerland". Starring Julie Walters, this programme was based on the true story of Dr Anne Turner, who in 2006 took her own life in an assisted suicide in Switzerland after developing an incurable degenerative disease. Fergus had interviewed Anne about her decision, and was with her and her children in Zurich on the day she died.

Three months ago, Fergus reported for Panorama as part of an hour-long special on swine flu. He has since pursued the evolving story through his blog site entitled "Fergus on Flu", which recently won the accolade of "Best Online Health Contribution" from the Guild of Health Writers. Last week, Fergus' blog reported that it might be better to temporarily rename the site "Fergus with Flu", as he was off work with a cough and cold, looking after his eight-year-old son Hugo, who had classic symptoms of swine flu. Demonstrating the increasing potency of the blogosphere, Fergus' dispassionate account of the frustrating time he'd had in acquiring antivirals for Hugo swiftly led to an announcement of improved arrangements for their supply to the public in his district.

Besides eight-year-old Hugo, Fergus has two daughters, Scarlett and Saskia. To all of his children Fergus passes on the wisdom of his late

father Michael, as encapsulated in Franklin's axiom about pouring your purse into your brain. Fergus' wife Véronique was formerly a GP and now works in the pharmaceuticals industry. On hearing the news of today's ceremony, young Hugo pointed out that there will in future be two doctors in the Walsh household. He then paused and added: "but when I'm feeling ill, I think I'll still talk to you first Mummy". There are limits, after all, to the authority of the BBC's Medical Correspondent!

Notwithstanding Hugo's ambivalent appraisal, the positive impact of Fergus' work is increasingly receiving the recognition it so richly merits. In October this year he delivered the prestigious annual Schorstein Lecture at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, and he has won no fewer than five broadcasting awards from the Medical Journalists' Association. In recognition of his outstanding contribution to the public understanding of medicine, Mr Chancellor, I now ask you to bestow upon Fergus Walsh the Degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger