

MJA NEWS

The newsletter of the Medical Journalists' Association

April-May 2011



Panel of experts to assist nominations for MJA Summer Awards

This year the selection of the names MJA members vote upon for the Summer awards will be assisted by a specially recruited panel of experts. *Philippa Pigache* explains how it will work.

The MJA Summer Awards have been running now for eight years. They were deliberately designed to be awarded, not on personally submitted work, judged by experts, but by being nominated and then voted on by MJA members themselves, and based on a whole body of work over the previous year. This works well where mainstream media are concerned. Most members watch TV, read the broadsheets, surf the web for medical websites and probably read some specialist magazines. However, when it comes to specialist media, most of us are really only expert on the media that we contribute to, if we are honest. And when it comes to regional newspapers and programmes, we only know the region where we live. With the best will in the world no one can access subscription-only publications, or material that goes out in parts of the country where we don't live.

How to overcome this inevitable limitation when it comes to selecting names worthy of an award? When the Summer Awards were extended to regional journalism it was realised that nomination by existing members would not work, so it was opened up for regional journalists to submit their own work for the members to read/view/listen, to assess and then vote upon. As an innovation this year the

awards team has decided to recruit a panel of journalism experts to supplement the names the members put forward across the board and to improve the balance and range of names/work you, the members, will ultimately vote upon. This year this option will be extended to small, controlled-circulation journals: editors may nominate and the expert panel will select for the shortlist.

The awards categories will still be the same (see list with this newsletter) and you, the members, can still nominate. The experts' nominations will be in addition. The three top-scoring names in each category will then be invited to back-up their nomination with samples of their work, which will be posted on a special MJA Awards website so that you the members can assess them and vote.

On the panel will be experts from all sectors: print, broadcasting, online,



Simon Warne

specialist and consumer, and from academe. Simon Warne (former editor of *Hospital Doctor*), who devised the new-style Summer Awards, will chair them. He will be joined by senior broadsheet writers Christine Doyle (former *Telegraph*) and John Illman (former *Mail, Guardian*), who is now also a lecturer in medical journalism. More names will be announced. Shortlisted names and voting papers will be circulated in June. ♦

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Once again the MJA Open Book Awards will be presented in the august and appropriate surrounding of the Wellcome Library in Euston Road, courtesy of the Wellcome Trust. (Invitation with this newsletter.) The presentation will take place on Tuesday, May 10, 6.30 for 7 p.m. Dr Anne Rowe, one of our judges this year, will provide a short address on the topic of 'Trauma in contemporary fiction, which will be followed by the presentation of the four open awards, plus the Tony Thistlethwaite award for an MJA author. ♦

NoticeBoard

New members

Helen Briggs is a writer and broadcaster specialising in health, medicine, science and the environment, with more than a decade's experience of radio, TV, magazine and online journalism. Her reports, on everything from medical science to space missions, have featured on the *BBC News* website, on Radios 1, 2, 4, 5 Live and the World Service. She has a BSc and MPhil in life sciences and has also taught specialist journalism as a visiting lecturer at the University of Westminster.

Andy Coghlan has been covering major breakthroughs in medicine and the biosciences, from the creation of Dolly the cloned sheep to the arrival of the first draft of the human genome, since joining *New Scientist* as a science reporter in 1986. Among the honours he has received are two of the annual Association of British Science Writers' science-writing 'Oscars', an award for science writing given by the American Society for Microbiology, and Health Journalist of 2006 from the MJA (he was also shortlisted in 2010). For this year's MJA Winter awards, he became a judge. Before joining *New Scientist* he spent six years on the news section at *Chemistry & Industry* magazine, and freelanced for the nationals, including *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*.

Kathryn Harrison qualified in medicine from the University of Nottingham and started her foundation year as a doctor at King's Mill Hospital in Nottinghamshire in 2010. She has had articles published in *Obesity Today*, the journal of the National Obesity Forum, and *Student BMJ*, covering patient education and health promotion as well as obesity.

Mark Henderson is science editor of *The Times*, and has covered science for the paper since 2000. As well as news reporting, he writes the Science Matters column for *Eureka*, *The Times'* monthly science magazine, and he contributes regularly to the opinion pages. He won NUH/MJA awards in 2005 and 2006 for General Medical Consumer News, and also Story of the Year in 2006, and he took best General-readership Feature in this year's MJA Winter Awards. He was also runner-up in the European Best Cancer Reporter award in 2010. He takes a particular interest in genomics, reproductive medicine and the politics of science. His first book is *50 Genetics Ideas You Really Need to Know* (Quercus, 2009) and his second, *The Geek Manifesto*, about science and politics, will be published in spring 2012.

Jane Kirby has been the Press Association's health correspondent for the last four years, following a period as a trainee and general news reporter. Starting on student newspapers, she trained at the *Brighton Argus*, and with several national newspapers and women's magazines. She has been shortlisted for a number of awards, including the *Press Gazette's* Student Feature Writer of the Year and the MJA's Health Journalist of the Year, 2010.

More new members

Helen Mooney was a senior news reporter for *Health Service Journal* from 2005 to 2009, when she went freelance. She specialises in government proposals for the health service and how these impact on both medical professionals and healthcare managers, and tries to find new and innovative medical and policy developments in the NHS to write about. Recent articles have appeared in the *British Medical Journal*, *Health Service Journal*, *Nursing Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Public Finance* and *Community Care* magazines. She also writes special reports, brochures and leaflets for the Department of Health, the NHS Confederation and the Healthcare Foundation.

Frances Pickersgill is currently careers section editor at *Nursing Standard* (NS). Over the last 10 years she has been involved in editorial and start-up projects for parent RCN Publishing, including setting up and taking over the career development section of NS. She has launched and edited three new publications from scratch for RCN Publishing. One continues to grow in coverage and sales, one was sold, and the third fell foul of company-wide financial cutbacks. Before joining the RCN, she worked as a nurse at every level in the health service.

Ruth Williams is a freelance who writes about doctors, scientists, and everything they do. She files for both lay and academic publications on everything from Nobel Prize winning partnerships to inebriated insects; from cutting-edge therapies to medical malpractice. She also dabbles in the occasional spot of travel writing. Her work has appeared in print and online including in *The Lancet*, *The Lancet Neurology*, *Nature*, *Nature Reviews Immunology*, *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, *SEED*, *The Naked Scientists*, and *Intelligent Life* (Economist Group). In a previous life, Ruth was a real, live scientist – with test tubes and a white lab coat. She has a PhD in genetics from King's College, London, and was a postdoctoral researcher in stem cell biology at Imperial College, London.

Anne Ward Platt graduated in English from Bristol University and worked first in education. She also acquired experience of health and social care, as well as the voluntary sector. She is currently director of a management consultancy focusing on health-related issues, and has been published in *Management in Practice*, *Archives of Disease in Childhood* and the *British Medical Journal*. She is an experienced conciliator, and author of *Conciliation in Healthcare: Managing and resolving complaints and conflict* (Radcliffe Publishing, 2008). She has been a non-executive director in the NHS since 1998 and is currently deputy chair of the Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust.

Peter Weaving has worked in the same practice as a GP in Cumbria for 26 years. He qualified from Nottingham University medical school and worked around Manchester for a couple of years before training for general practice. He is also NHS Cumbria's commissioning lead for Carlisle, and has previously practised and studied primary care and health services commissioning in Canada and the United States. He is currently heavily involved (quoted on BBC Radio 4) as co-chair in one of the new, large GP consortia favoured by Andrew Lansley's new health and social care Bill. He writes a monthly diary piece for *Practical Commissioning*. ♦

Here are the books shortlisted for the 2011 MJA OBA

The MJA Open Book Awards will be presented at the Wellcome Library (as last year) on the evening of Tuesday, May 10. (Invitation enclosed.) There will be four open awards plus one for an MJA author – the Tony Thistlethwaite Award. On this page and overleaf, the judges in the four sections describe the books they have shortlisted for these awards.

General readership, non-fiction section

Judges: Sandra Hempel and Adam Wishart

We were warned that the range in this section is always daunting. At one end lively reminiscences: Les Pringle's unsentimental recollections of life in the ambulance service in the 1970s, Ben Macfarlane's *Doctor at Sea*-style tales of emergencies and mirth as a medic on a cruise ship, and Tony Copperfield's wickedly acute look at the world of the modern GP. At the other, Antonio Damasio's *Self Comes to Mind*, which cites scientific evidence for regarding consciousness not as separate from the body but as a biological process created by a living organism. There were moving personal accounts of coping with illness and there was Hugh Aldersey-Williams' colourful story of the lives of the elements in *Periodic Tales*. Nearly all were well written and well worth reading. Some were compelling. And what had appeared at first impossible eventually became straightforward. We needed little discussion before agreeing our shortlist.

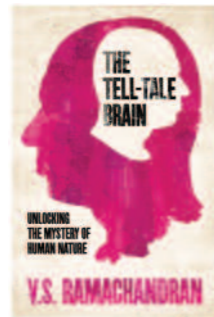
101 top tips in medicine, John Larkin (Radcliffe Publishing)

This book describes some very common clinical problems and situations in a way that will resonate with many doctors on the front line. While sensitive souls may be offended by the shock-horror revelation that some patients abuse the health service, exaggerate their disabilities or enjoy the sick-role, to be fair, the author also spends time and space criticising sloppy thinking in doctors, especially the young and inexperienced ones who often have to deal with these difficulties. He does this with humour, several new mnemonics and memorable phrases.



The Tell-tale Brain, V.S. Ramachandran (William Heinemann)

This fascinating book takes us on an evocative tour of some of the more outlandish neurological disorders: the case of a man whose wife looked like a new woman every time he saw her; the patient whose brain damage provoked the creation of lovely poignant works of art, or the student who recognised his mother but thought her an imposter. Ramachandran uses these outliers of clinical experience to draw beautifully a different way of understanding cognition. Together, these enigmatic conditions and his intriguing experiments are woven into the compelling idea that the artefacts of evolution remain with us and provide the crucial link between the brain, mind and body.



General readership, self-help section

Judges: David Delvin and Janet Wright

Co-judging the self-help section taught us a lot about the topics these books cover. Some are distressing, others nigglingly common; as universal as breathing or as distinctive as a refusal to be brought down by an illness that's called 'disabling'. Some of the most thoughtful are about another person's condition – caring for those who have lost the ability to care for themselves, or to cope with the addictions that destroy a family.

Living Longer, Living Better, Lionel Opie (OUP)

This is a guide to maximising your long-term health, especially protecting the heart and brain. Detailed and informative, it is particularly useful to someone who may have read a lot about healthy living, but lacks the scientific know-how to sort the wheat from the chaff published on the subject. A veteran cardiologist, Opie examines and explains the bio-medical science behind the health advice, in mercifully plain English.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot

(Macmillan)

In 1951, Henrietta Lacks died on a 'coloured ward' in Johns Hopkins University Hospital. Her cancer cells, taken without her consent, were kept alive by the new medium of cell culture. As one of the first lab-propagated immortal 'lines' they found themselves playing elemental parts in much of late 20th-century medicine – from the discovery of the polio vaccine, to the search for the cancer virus. Rebecca Skloot masterfully excavates the many tragedies of Henrietta's family, caught between the idealism of the scientists and the harsh realities of being poor and black in America. In doing so she not only tells a gripping story of science, but also delivers a powerful polemic against medical paternalism and societal racism.

Angel of Death – the story of smallpox, Gareth Williams

(Pallgrave Macmillan)

Some of us may have a vague awareness of cowpox and its role in Edward Jenner's discovery of vaccination against smallpox; even fewer, of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's experiment using the Turkish practice of inoculation. Gareth Williams fleshes out these landmarks in medical history with lively detail, and also traces the global story of this deadly and disfiguring disease, from the text of the Hebrew bible and the pock-marked face of a mummified Pharaoh, to its eventual obliteration in the second half of the 20th century. It is a meticulously researched story with pace and flair, introducing us to tragic happenings and unforgettable characters, including the wonderfully-named Reverend Cotton Mather, a fire-and-brimstone preacher implicated in the Salem witch trials, whose congregation admired him so much that they clubbed together to buy him his very own slave. Both the history and the science are terrific. ♦

Understanding Traumatic Stress, Nigel Hunt and Sue McHale

(Sheldon)

Post-traumatic stress disorder is increasingly under discussion as soldiers return damaged from war. But, as psychologists Hunt and McHale point out, it also affects survivors of crime, illness and other disasters. The authors look at potential solutions, especially the use of narrative to make sense of shattered lives.

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

Coping with Early-onset Dementia, Jill Eckersley (Sheldon)

This is a thoughtful and clear-eyed guide to a condition most of us dread. It covers all the practical bases, from claiming benefits, via researching medications, through to facing bereavement. And it is sensitive in its treatment of the feelings suffered by both patients and carers, including fear, anger and a desperate sense of loss.

Specialist readership section

Judges: Colin Brewer and Ruth Richardson

Oxford Handbook of Medical Dermatology, Susan Burge and Dinny Wallis (OUP)

Dermatology textbooks start with two great advantages: they have lots of colourful pictures, and many of the conditions have names derived from Greek and Latin that appeal to our antiquarian interests. Admittedly, fastidious readers may need a generous dose of anti-puke medicine before looking at some of the illustrations, but an encouraging proportion of the more hideous conditions are treatable or tend to disappear spontaneously. Burge and Wallis take us through their diagnosis, investigation and management in a concise and didactic way. Naturally, in a heavily-medicated age – further complicated by self-medication with a plethora of over-the-counter or over-the-internet drugs – one of the longest sections concerns unwelcome skin reactions to these compounds.

The use and misuse of psychiatric drugs, Joel Paris

(Wiley-Blackwell)

This is a thoughtful, well-written and researched book (28 pages of references) on the over-use and over-selling of drugs for psychiatric conditions. Paris doesn't start – as some critics do – from the position that medication has no place in psychiatry. He is clear that it can be very useful, especially in the more severe forms of illness. And, as a professor of psychiatry at the prestigious McGill University in Montreal, he has been around long enough to know how the prognosis for such serious conditions has improved in the last half-century. However, he is worried about mission-creep in

Medical-theme fiction

Judges: Anne Rowe and Liz Jensen

Who is Mr Satoshi? Jonathan Lee (William Heinemann)

In this, Jonathan Lee's first novel, the photographer 'Foss' Fossick, traumatised, agoraphobic and compulsively self-medicating after a personal tragedy, is in no fit state to go on a journey into the unknown. But when his mother dies and leaves a package addressed to a mysterious 'Mr Satoshi', Foss feels compelled to honour her wish. His journey of discovery takes him to Tokyo and beyond – with life-changing results. Deftly-written and elegantly composed, the novel asks: what kind of horror might endanger our sanity, and how might we deal with it?

The Good Psychologist, Noam Shpancer (Henry Holt & Company)

This debut novel thoughtfully explores the 'healer, heal thyself' theme through the personal and professional dilemmas of a cognitive behaviour therapist. As Shpancer's unnamed hero tries to practise what he preaches to a class of college students, and grapples with the demands of patients with acute compulsive disorders, he is forced to confront his own loneliness, and take a painful moral reckoning of the desires and decisions that have shaped his life. A wise, clear-eyed and beautifully written meditation on the hopes and disappointments that texture our lives.

Caring – an essential guide, Lorena Tonarelli (Need2Know)

The layout and clarity of Lorena Tonarelli's book on caring make it ideal for a busy carer who wants practical advice without wading through acres of text. ♦

(The Tony Thistlethwaite Award for an MJA Author goes to a book from one of these two General non-fiction sections.)

psychiatry and the increasing tendency to medicalise the ordinary ups and downs of human mood and existence. He is very good on such important aspects of the debate as the influence of Big Pharma, and the consistently underestimated placebo effect of all therapeutic interventions.

Oxford Handbook of Medical Statistics, Janet and Philip Peacock (OUP)

For many doctors (and, we suspect, for even more medical journalists) the field of medical statistics is not an exciting one. We all know that if you torture statistics enough, you can get them to agree to anything, and perhaps we are not good at recognising the signs of torture. Janet and Philip Peacock have produced a readable pocket book, broken down into bite-sized sections. It should help journalists both to interpret new research when it is well-supported by statistics, and to ask the right sort of sceptical questions when it is not.

Venous thromboembolism; a nurse's guide to prevention and management, Ellen Welch (Wiley-Blackwell)

This author manages the considerable feat of making venous thromboembolism (VTE), which mainly means deep-vein thrombosis of the legs, and pulmonary embolism, an interesting subject. She does this partly by giving us the historical background – as far back as the Ebers papyrus of 1550 BC – but also by persuading us that the neglect of VTE is responsible for much avoidable death and disability, and that it should not be difficult to prevent much of it. ♦

Landed, Tim Pears (William Heinemann)

In *Landed* the central character, Owen, is traumatised after a car accident that killed his eldest child and claimed his right hand. His sense of guilt, coupled with debilitating attacks of phantom limb syndrome, lead to the breakdown of his marriage, and catapult him into a desperate odyssey to the landscape of his childhood to reclaim his children, his dignity and sense of self. Pears' novel is an affecting, psychologically acute study of a man in crisis, and an elegiac meditation on bereavement, post-traumatic stress and the healing power of landscape. ♦



Online academic conferencing: no air-miles, but carbon neutral

In February, MJA members were invited to log-in to a conference running in Athens while still sitting at their desks in the UK. A mixed advantage when the location was sunny Greece, but an advance no less. *Colin Brewer*, one of the organisers, who attended the old-fashioned way, reports.



The latest advance in IT enables you to log-in and watch entire sessions of a recent international addiction conference for free. If you are interested in evidence-based developments in the treatment of drug addiction (including alcohol, our favourite drug) or even if you are just interested in the advance of online communications, follow the link below. The 10th Stapleford International Addiction Conference was held in Athens at the end of February and was the first of the series that enabled participants to watch and ask questions online as well as in person. Actually, it may have been the world's first such conference to go online in this way. In addition to those attending, some 350 people from 49 countries participated online.

Highlights include randomised-controlled trials (RCTs) of implants and depot injections of naltrexone for heroin addiction. Naltrexone blocks all the effects of opiates and can thus prevent

deaths from accidental or deliberate heroin overdose, as well as making heroin use (and thus much heroin-related crime) a pointless exercise. Naltrexone is the only effective medical treatment for heroin addiction allowed in Russia, where methadone maintenance is still illegal, and some of the best research comes from there. Rather late in the day, our National Addiction Centre is said to be considering some pilot studies.

You can also learn about the first vaccine against nicotine (NicVAX) which should be coming to a pharmacy near you in the next year or so.

Flumazenil is a drug few MJA members will have heard of but it enables people to withdraw from valium and similar benzo tranquillisers in days rather than months or years using fairly simple techniques.

Finally, as someone who has been banging on very unfashionably since the 1980s about the effectiveness of disulfiram (Antabuse) in alcoholism, when properly administered, it was a particular pleasure for me to hear speakers from the US, India and Germany confirm that the evidence base for disulfiram is now pretty much beyond dispute.

Unfortunately, there are still many people in the addiction treatment industry (especially Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous enthusiasts) who are ideologically opposed to the use of any medication to aid coming off alcohol. Personally, I think they are a bit like the ideologues who don't approve of any 'artificial' method of pregnancy control – but follow the link, register, and then judge for yourselves.

https://services.choruscall.eu/links/stapleford_files/sessions.html ♦

Théodore MacDonald, 1933-2011: an appreciation

Loss of vision is hardly a cause for celebration but Théo MacDonald (Théodore Harney MacDonald, professor emeritus, Global Health Rights, at the Research Institute for Human Rights and Social Justice, the London Metropolitan University) managed to find a positive slant even in that. In January this year, he blogged that deteriorating eyesight forced him to give up regular medical practice which 'at last gave me the time to reflect on all that I had seen and to investigate their social and economic contexts in greater detail'.

Born in Quebec, Canada, in 1933, as one of six children, Théo took a first degree in music, followed by another from McGill University in mathematics and epidemiology. He went on to work in health and education with NGOs, UNESCO, and the WHO in some of the world's poorest nations. This experience, coupled with his passion for global health and human rights, informed his prolific writing. Mathura P. Shrestha, Nobel Peace Prize winner, said in a foreword to one of Théo's books, 'Théodore has chosen the hard life of a persistent fighter, with his powerful pen, for conscience over super-power chauvinism.'

Jamie Etherington, from his publishers Radcliffe, described his passion, enthusiasm and 'thirst for writing, championing the cause of the oppressed and challenging the integrity of monolithic structures such as the IMF and the WHO'. But in addition to the dedicated campaigning, Jamie also remembered Théo's wonderful humour and healthy sense of the ridiculous, along with charming quirks, such as a knack for memorising telephone numbers via the musical scale.



Théo with Jeanette Marshall, OBA Judge, 2008

Théo appeared on the MJA's radar in 2007, when one of his books was shortlisted for the MJA's Open Book award, and the following year he was delighted to win the General Readership Award with *The Global Human Right to Health – dream or possibility?* (See above.)

I met him in 2009 when the MJA invited him to be a judge in that section and I was his fellow judge. I visited him in Littlehampton and spent a cosy afternoon in a room packed with reminders of his love for music, books and family. His quest for global justice was mirrored at a micro-level; despite his failing eyesight, he had read every word of more than 20 books submitted – many he read twice – to be sure that all were properly evaluated.

Théo died on March 7, 2011. He is survived by his wife Christine and eight children. The MJA is proud to have been associated with him. ♦

Helen Saul



Sarah Pennells

Ray Stanbridge

Chas Roy-Chowdhury

Ric Belcher

It may be a calumny, but there is a cruel rumour that journalists are not very clued-up when it comes to money. Certainly, that was the thought prompting a seminar on matters of personal finance at the Medical Society of London on Lady Day (April 6). At least one of the speakers may have had a slightly inflated idea of journalistic earnings. (You are not allowed to accumulate more than £1.5 million in your pension pot any more. Who would not have such problems?) However, the advice was sound and from the pedigree horses' mouths. *Mary Black* reports.

Sarah Pennells, her voice familiar from BBC radio programmes (*Your Money, Money Box* and the Saturday breakfast show on BBC1) told us how to protect our financial status. She had 10 financial commandments. Pay off your debts in the most efficient way: highest interest rate first. Clear your credit card swiftly – minimum amount is not enough. Learn how to boost your credit score. Check your credit-reference file and get it corrected if inaccurate. Do this six months in advance if applying for a loan or mortgage. Use a reputable mortgage broker. Suss out life insurance – get it written in trust if you can. Start saving; it's about accumulating reserves, not about a massive interest rate. Think about retirement now; there are several tax-efficient ways to save, apart from pensions. Seek sound advice and, of course, make a will.

Ray Stanbridge, better known as the MJA's honorary treasurer, had flown in from Bermuda to advise us on how to pay less tax – legally, of course – so that we might one day all move to Bermuda. Sadly, those earning over £100,000 p.a. have lost their personal allowance, but at least corporation tax has come down. Ray recommended five steps to lower tax. Become self-employed. Alternatively, become a limited company – both attract greater tax-deductible expenses. Plan expenditure; don't live hand-to-mouth. Do nothing to attract the attention of the tax inspector; pay tax due on time, and avoid a tax inspection. Get a good professional team around you.

Chas Roy-Chowdhury is head of taxation at the Association of Certified Chartered Accountants. The recent budget had been painful, he said, but with softer bits around the edges. He emphasised that expenses claimed against income tax must be 'wholly and exclusively'

connected to your work. Never over-egg your expenses, he instructed: it attracts unwelcome attention. Keep meticulous records and be practical. For example, install a dedicated business phone line.

Ric Belcher of Medical Money Management talked about pensions, which he characterised as long-term, tax-efficient, deferred saving. He distinguished between defined-*benefit* pensions, based on what you are earning when you come to retire and defined-*contribution*, based on the money put in, and how much it has earned on the money-markets by the time you draw it out. He explained the stakeholder pension (very limited charges); the personal pension (unlimited charges, sometimes in different tiers), and the self-invested personal pension, or SIPP, which can be composed of various types of investment product but with higher charges. He predicted a shift over the next two years towards a variation on this: a SIPP 'clone' with greater flexibility and lower charges. He did some pretty hair-raising calculations as to how much of your income you should save to achieve a reasonable pension: 24 per cent if you start at 25. A much higher proportion if you leave it later. (The audience grew pale.)

A lively debate followed. The frustration of the government changing the rules on savings and pensions was clearly felt. The question of a tax inspection worried many; insurance against this eventuality can defray cost. Hiding in Bermuda is a pipedream.

(Presentations from Ray Stanbridge, Chas Roy-Chowdhury and Ric Belcher, with more detail, may be found on the MJA website, www.mjauk.org.)

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