Editorial

A time for growth, maturation and harvest

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run

So begins Keats’ Ode to Autumn, written quite possibly on the day of the month this issue lands on your desk almost two centuries ago.

Having grown and matured on the other side of the aisle in the Commons, Andrew Lansley’s hour of harvest has finally arrived. Summer may have mellowed the reactions to the changes he intends to introduce, although they remain revolutionary at their core, especially on an accelerated timetable of three years to completion. These include doing away with strategic health authorities and primary care trusts, and replacing them with a commissioning board and transferring public health functions to local authorities. The crux of the reforms places an enormous challenge, or burden even, on primary care providers, and at the same time underestimates or perhaps misunderstands the contribution that public health professionals are currently making to commissioning. Whether primary care proves a willing and able partner remains to be seen. The promise of a new national public health service offers much in principle, and further details in the autumn will be eagerly awaited.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too

As the spring of rebirth from Central to the City has met with threats of sovereign bankruptcy in the so-called ‘PIGS’ economies of Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain, and other signs of economic frailty, a more subdued autumn atmosphere of fiscal prudence and economic discipline take over once again. McKee, Annett, Hunter and Davis offer thoughts on how public health might fare in such times and importantly on how practitioners should respond in mitigation of the inevitable cutbacks and other consequences to maintain even, population wellness.

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sings; and now with treble soft;
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Very loud bleats from the Council of Europe have imposed on the public sphere a particular viewpoint of the public health response to pandemic H1N1. Despite the decibel level they have not found sympathetic echoes from most other quarters, with the disappointing exception of a major medical weekly, whereas treble soft evidence-based voices have lent constructive and sensible advice in preparation for the next global disaster. Meirion Evans, Chair of the Faculty’s Health Protection Committee gives his take on the topic on the next page.

The union between the ideal and the real in Keats’ Ode is very much analogous to how public health should act as a bridge between the laboratory bench and the benches of Westminster. Much work remains to be done by public health professionals in helping to shape and influence the detail of the structural changes ahead to ensure a vibrant, well-supported public health infrastructure able to deliver a real impact on health and well-being in the short and medium term. The actual paradise in To Autumn has provided a timely subject for us as Editors—a busy autumn lies ahead and hope that you too may find time to grow, mature and harvest this season.

Gabriel M. Leung, Selena Gray

References