Jelly beans and jumbo jets

How many jelly beans can you get into a jumbo jet? This was a question asked at interview of a young graduate seeking employment. His answer, that he really had no idea, may have explained his lack of success. When I read this in the education section of The Guardian, my immediate thought was why someone had asked such a strange and apparently unanswerable question. But by now, you will have your answer ready ... or perhaps not. If not, here's mine. You can easily get one in and maybe a packet in your pocket. If you are a salesperson for the confectioner, you could probably get a case or two in the hold, but if you wanted to take a lot in your hand luggage, it would be well to check with the airline that the jelly beans would not, being some sort of gel, be regarded as potentially explosive fluids. It turns out to have been a rather interesting question, designed to examine the candidate’s ability to think laterally. I really don’t know how I would have answered it if asked in my interviews for jobs as a young doctor—maybe I was asked such questions and this explains why at one stage I only got the eighth job I was interviewed for.

It was only a decade later, around 1970, that I read Edward De Bono’s book on lateral thinking and realized how important, but how dangerous, this can be in medicine and science. Advances in science come both from incremental change, step-by-step building on what is known and also from radical new ideas. Nowadays, the first of these is usually the product of well-equipped teams of researchers, whereas the latter is dependent upon individuals; papers by lateral thinkers have only one or very few authors, whereas most scientific papers are compiled by teams. Lateral thinkers, like James Lovelock of the Gaia world, are an endangered species as the members of grant committees, editorial committees and most referees tend to be step-by-step people and nervous of endorsing radical new ideas.

I believe that there is a lateral thinker in all of us, a persistence of the innocence of childhood when we asked questions of grown-ups and puzzled over the answers, an innocence that seems to be washed away too easily by the formal and dogmatic education my generation received. In contrast, in art classes one is constantly encouraged to get out of one’s comfort zone and one hopes that the current undergraduate medical curriculum fosters a similar attitude. I have practised a trick for keeping the innocence alive. It has been my habit to avoid big medical meetings and generate new ideas. How many jelly beans? Only connect!

Anthony Seaton

e-mail: a.seaton@abdn.ac.uk