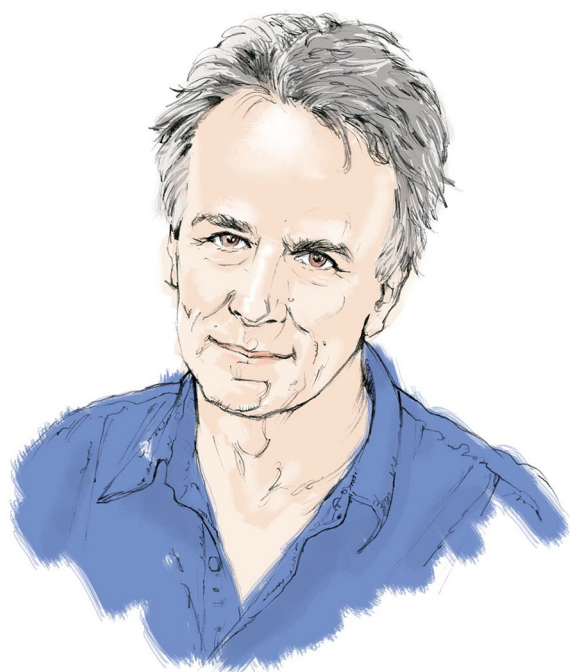




# OBSERVATIONS

## BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

### John Collee: No career, just “a life”



#### What was your earliest ambition?

To travel and to be a writer.

#### Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Back then: Graham Greene. Now: Barack Obama.

#### What was the worst mistake in your career?

I've not really had a career; I've had a life. Taking wrong turns and finding out where those paths lead is an essential part of the process. For instance, turning down a GP traineeship to write BBC radio sketches was an obvious error of judgment, but then my first novel was published, and I was off on a new tack.

#### What was your best career move?

Getting married and having kids. Being a writer would otherwise be a fairly lonely existence.

#### Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?

I'm not really qualified to judge. Since Thatcher's era a succession of health secretaries have tried to reform NHS finance on the false assumptions that (a) health workers are motivated largely by the money, which is utterly wrong, and (b) more expensive medicine is necessarily better, which is clearly wrong too. In Australia I admired Neal Blewett [Labor's minister for health in the 1980s] for his approach to informing the public and his early response to AIDS.

#### Who is the person you would most like to thank, and why?

Family and friends too numerous to mention. No man is an island: we're all part of some larger organism, with limbs on different continents.

#### To whom would you most like to apologise?

The next generation, to whom we're leaving a dreadful legacy of climate change.

#### If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

It depends on the circumstances of the gift. I see a difference between money you earn and money you accidentally happen on: lotto wins and share market earnings are in the latter category. If I thought that I'd really earned it I'd give it to my kids; if it fell out of the sky I'd buy a patch of land and give it to the local residents to plant trees.

#### Where are or were you happiest?

Ah, another tricky one, because happiness isn't the absence of stress—it's a subtle balance between stress and discovery. Probably working as a doctor with a small band of colleagues in the Solomon Islands, where our first child, Lauren, was born.

**Biography**

John Collee, 60, is a doctor, novelist, and screenwriter who was born and trained in Edinburgh. He published his first novel, *Kingsley's Touch*, in 1984, then *A Paper Mask* (1987) and *The Rig* (1991). During this period he wrote a popular weekly column, "A Doctor Writes," for the *Observer*. He has travelled widely as a doctor and journalist and met his wife, the Australian TV reporter Deborah Snow, on the way to Azerbaijan. They now live in Sydney, where he wrote screenplays for *Master and Commander*, with the Australian director Peter Weir, and *Happy Feet*, with a fellow ex-doctor, George Miller, who shares Collee's belief that story telling through film is a form of global group therapy. He has three children and is an active member of the climate action group 350.org.

**What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?**

As regards writing, the internet. As regards everything else, climate change.

**Do you support doctor assisted suicide?**

Definitely . . . but it depends on the doctor.

**What book should every doctor read?**

At the risk of sounding like a self promoting ass, I'd like every newly qualified medic to read, or watch the movie of, my second novel, *A Paper Mask*. It's a thriller about a bogus doctor, which makes the point that doctors' true worth depends on not how much they know but how much they care about others.

**What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?**

*If*— by Rudyard Kipling.

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Foreign travel.

**What television programmes do you like?**

Mainly news and current affairs. I've recently enjoyed *Borgen*, *The West Wing*, *Sherlock*, and *War and Peace*.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

My health.

**What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?**

Cycling, and nagging everyone to switch off the lights.

**What personal ambition do you still have?**

On one level it's kind of unseemly, having a pressing ambition at the age of 60: it's time to budge over and let some younger folks have a go. I love my work and would like to keep doing that. Everest and Antarctica will be much better off without me visiting.

**Summarise your personality in three words**

Outgoing, optimistic, lazy—and undisciplined.

**Where does alcohol fit into your life?**

One unit a day.

**What is your pet hate?**

Status games and negativity.

**What would be on the menu for your last supper?**

Totally irrelevant; it's the company that counts.

**Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor/academic/commentator/politician/health expert/patient advocate?**

Yes. I've been all of those except politician. Everything I've done, I could probably have done better.

**If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?**

Lying down, sleeping.