

Wands, wobbles and ROYALTY

Frank blew the dust off the 40 year old book, pushed his glasses down his nose and squinted at the title: **The Challenge of Nystagmus**: “We were young then,” he said, turning to Northwick who generously filled another deckchair beside him in the garden.

Frank and Northwick were enjoying a hot summer’s day sitting in the late afternoon shade on the lawn. “Here, listen to this Northwick,” said Frank, flicking through the pages of the heavy blue book. “Back then, sometimes they couldn’t even tell us why our eyes wobbled. Hardly anyone realised that if you had nystagmus you needed more time to see. They didn’t know that it affected our field of vision either!”

Northwick chuckled. “I used to think of real fields full of cows and sheep when the doctors talked about my field of vision. I thought they were asking whether we could tell sheep from cows – and sometimes we couldn’t. But what they actually meant was how far we could see left and right and up and down. They thought we were OK, but the doctors were wrong because they didn’t understand wobbly eyes much then.”

Frank nodded in agreement. “But the big difference between now and then is that they still thought there was no way of curing nystagmus. It took a while and there were some hiccups along the way, but they are getting better at curing it now.”

Northwick rubbed the greying fur on his chin and asked Frank to pass him the book. “You have to remember that no-one knew much about genes then. Hardly anyone imagined that one day doctors would be able to change them and stop things like nystagmus. But, as you say, it’s not always been quite as easy as it is now.”



Frank nodded again. “Mmm hmm. We forget how things slowly change over time. We didn’t have the drugs we have now either – the ones that can re-wire the brain and cure nystagmus that way sometimes. But the big breakthrough was that Princess being born with nystagmus. That made a huge difference.”

Millions of money

Northwick nodded. “Yep. That certainly changed things. Remember all the fuss and commotion when the news came out that a member of the royal family had an unheard of eye problem? Nystagmus wasn’t unheard of for long after that. It was funny how many doctors suddenly became interested and the millions of money that was poured into research.”

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Frank leant forward and took another biscuit from the plate on the picnic table between them. "Then after the Princess it seemed almost everyone had a relative or a friend with nystagmus. And so many rich and famous people owned up to having nystagmus or a child with nystagmus and started giving money to research."



Northwick stretched his legs, causing an audible creak – and not just of the deckchair. "That Brain-wand the Chinese invented helped a lot too. No more cutting people open to do surgery. Who'd have thought back then that within our life-times doctors would be able to sort out things like nystagmus just by waving a magic medical wand at your head?"

Frank edged his own deckchair over to stay in the shade of the tree. "And all those other discoveries too. It was researchers in India who cracked all the genes linked to nystagmus. And the Americans who finally came up with a way of showing other people what we see. We have a lot of people to thank for all the progress in the last 40 years."

"The funny thing is," Northwick continued, "that sometimes I actually miss having wobbly eyes. It wasn't all bad. It made us different. We could laugh about it. And I'm sure it meant I could eat more because of all the energy my eyes used up dancing around. I only have to look at a cake now and my waist expands another centimetre."

"Same here," said Frank patting his own generous stomach. "I know what you mean. What's more, I've never really got used to driving either. It's so boring."



"Wands, wobbles and royalty" – a version of a new Northwick story which was first published in NN's Focus newsletter 99 (October 2013).