

## PRIVATE THOUGHTS: THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT I WAS BORN ON A SATURDAY

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### Introduction

The confident way “There is no evidence” is used in scientific and political circles to silence debate in matters big and small has been a source of constant amazement to me for decades. The first time I heard the phrase was when I was undergraduate at Westminster Hospital School of Medicine in the mid 1950’s.

I was impressed by the epidemiological articles of Professor Richard Doll linking cigarette smoking to lung cancer. Later, my admiration knew no bounds when article after article continued to pour out of Oxford University from the pen of Sir Richard Doll, Professor Martin Vessey, and others claiming not only that smoking predisposed to cancer, but also that stopping smoking reduced the chances of cancer. However, debate in the media always managed to find one expert or other who claimed “there is no evidence that smoking causes cancer”. So loudly, vehemently, and persistently was “there is no evidence” trumpeted that I (and most listeners) began subliminally to interpret “there is no evidence ...” as “there is evidence that smoking does not cause cancer”. Heavy smokers preferred that interpretation too. Next, the phrase assumed a quasi-scholarly connotation, so much so that speakers at any scientific conference that sprinkled their presentations with a few “there is no evidence” statements were considered quite brilliant. They really had done fantastic research to arrive at that conclusion.

Next, politicians parroted “there is no evidence” to allow 24 hour alcohol availability. No evidence that it does any harm. In fact, there is evidence that it does no harm at all even to children.

Next, “there is no evidence” that proliferation of gambling casinos will do the slightest bit of harm. Why, there is evidence that Las Vegas is Las Vegas, and British cities are British cities.

Next, “there is no evidence” that heroin given to patients in sickle cell crisis contributes to the chest syndrome. Never mind the fact that opiates suppress

respiration and accelerate *in vivo* sickling, haematologists still say “there is no evidence that this is the case”.

Next, “There is no evidence for an intelligent design explanation of the universe” has, in some scientific circles, been rephrased to “Darwinian Evolution accounts for the origin of species, and for the universe itself”. With *ex cathedra* pronouncements like these, what place has Common Sense?

Next, with respect to Cannabis reclassification the experts have produced a scholarly report: “There is no evidence ...” therefore it should remain a Class C drug. “No evidence” that it does harm is now evidence that the drug does no harm. ‘Science’ has spoken. How dare ‘Common Sense’ compete with ‘Science’ and ‘Evidence-based Medicine’?

I have been a physician for many years, taught by the best brains of British undergraduate and postgraduate mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Medicine whose chief characteristic, now sadly missing, was to teach us not merely what to think but how to think. Even when this meant we students sometimes disagreed with our teachers we were applauded for it. They had succeeded in teaching us *how* to think. That “There is no evidence” has been endowed these days with an importance it hardly deserves can easily be demonstrated using the following tribal illustration.

### Tribal Illustration

“There is no evidence”, claim European scientists that I was born on a Saturday. They look for my birth certificate. None available in the Manya Krobo tribe in those days, and the Baptismal Certificate that had my date of birth was difficult to locate in my parent’s home many decades later. More research discovered that I was born on the Greenwich Line at Odumase Krobo, 40 miles north of the Tema coast, and that the best conclusion the experts could come to was that I had a 14.2857% chance of being born on a Saturday. A one in 7 chance to be precise! They were not quite satisfied with that conclusion but it was better than nothing – 14.2857% chance.

But comes an illiterate Krobo tribesman, whom I have never met but who, having been introduced to these research scientists produced “the evidence” within 10 seconds. How did he achieve what the “there is no evidence” experts could not? This true story shows us how: The year before last, the 1959 & 1960 Westminster Hospital Medical School graduates held our annual Reunion at The Athenaeum in central London.

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Terry Mott FRCS, whom I had not seen in almost half a century was so thrilled to see me he reminded the ageing colleagues that in Medical School I was known to have 9 names, adding “Felix used just 5 for examination purposes”. Then to my utter surprise Terry proceeded to recall all my names: Felix Israel Tete Domeno Kwami Siako Akote Konotey-Ahulu. “FULL MARKS!” I exclaimed, just as our distinguished teacher Sir Richard Bayliss MA MD FRCP would have done on his ward round when one of us rattled off ten causes of finger clubbing. I went on to explain the 9 names. Apart from the surname Konotey-Ahulu two of the names were obligatory and remain fixed before birth – gender specific, position specific, and day of birth specific. I would be Tete if I was second male of Mama’s children and Kwami if this male child came on a Saturday. ‘Ami’, if I was a Saturday female, and ‘Korkor’ if second female.

While the scientists, without a birth certificate or equivalent document were scratching their heads to improve upon the 1 in 7 chance of my being born on a Saturday the illiterate Krobo tribesperson was wondering what all the fuss was about. “What is Dorkita Konotey-Ahulu’s full name?” he asked in the Krobo language. Is it ‘Kwesi’ (Sunday)? No. Is it ‘Koji’ (Monday)? No. ‘Kwablah’ (Tuesday)? No. ‘Kwaku’ (Wednesday)? No. ‘Kwao’ (Thursday)? No. ‘Kofi’ (Friday)? No. Is it ‘Kwami’ (Saturday) then? Yes. “That, then, is the evidence you want”, my bemused fellow tribesperson said. “No evidence” has been found wanting.

### Cannabis Reclassification

Regarding the reclassification to ‘B’ of Cannabis by the British Home Secretary, I totally agree with the right honourable lady for disregarding the “there is no evidence” fiat of the experts. I congratulate her thus: “FULL MARKS, Jacqui Smith! Your common sense is very much in EVIDENCE”. Interestingly, Jacqui Smith’s successor Alan Johnson, the new British Home Secretary, shares her view so closely that he has recently sacked Professor David Nutt, his drugs adviser who some believe belongs to the “There is no evidence” group of scientists. I was one of 83 doctors voting in the British Medical Journal that we agreed with the sacking of Professor David Nutts. Other doctors, 443 of them, voted disapproving of the Home Secretary’s sacking of David Nutt. In my cover letter<sup>1</sup> I described two Fellows of The Royal Society who used information I had provided to the BMJ<sup>2</sup> in totally different ways. I had mentioned in the BMJ my genetic defect of extra digits to make an ethical point. Professor Sir David Weatherall of Oxford University used my information in the chapter on Ethics in his excellent Genetics textbook<sup>3</sup>, acknowledging where he got the information from.

Another Fellow of the Royal Society, Professor Steve Jones of London University used the very same information in his book on Genetics<sup>4</sup>, but omitted the ethical reason for my genetic history being made public, nor did he even acknowledge where he got his information from. So here you have one brilliant Fellow of the Royal Society acknowledging Ethics in Genetics, while the other brilliant FRS, refuses to mention Ethics in his entire book even when my personal history that he used gave him the perfect opportunity to do just that. It is not even true to say “There is no scientific evidence that Cannabis is more dangerous than alcohol”. I would rather trust our Professor C C Adomakoh who has shown conclusively that smoking ‘wee’ is dangerous *paa*<sup>5</sup>. Science, qua science, is not enough when dealing with Cannabis smoking. “Far be it from me” (I concluded in the BMJ article) to defend the Right Honourable Mr Alan Johnson in his decision to sack Professor David Nutt, but are the 443 BMJ readers (as of 5 November 2009) who are castigating him relying just on the ‘Science’ of the whole thing, and/or do the 83 who appeared to agree with the Home Secretary adduce extra-scientific reasons for their stance?<sup>1</sup>

By all means let us cherish Professor Chris Adomakoh’s expertise above others’, and let us value common sense above ‘scientific’ consensus. When at our Scientific Conferences we hear “There is no evidence” generously sprinkled in the presentations, let us remember the Krobo tribesman who solved in 10 seconds what baffled foreign experts failed to solve.

### References

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