

# Jumping ship

Chris F Richards

THE RADIO CLOCK strikes up as it has done many thousands of times before to usher in another day. But this is not just any day. This is the last time that you will quickly shower and shave, toss on the executive uniform of tailor-made suit and tie, throw down toast and coffee, and head down the freeway in the company car to enter the office and battle once again with the problems of money (or rather the lack of it) and those queuing to spend it. Today is to be your Waterloo, when you become both Napoleon and Wellington. You will “lose” because you finally decided to leave the battlefield and “jump ship”, but you will also “win” because you imagine that a world apart from the hospital will (at this time in your career) be a better one. You realise (and the irony is not lost on you) that you are leaving a hospital to improve your own mental and physical well being!

The drive down the freeway is pleasant, indeed a bit euphoric. You look at the galahs on the embankment and laugh to yourself. You sing along with a song on the radio and click your fingers (even though the guy in the car beside is staring at you). But you don't care; you are on the threshold of something new. For the first time in years your mind is not cluttered with a “to do” list and meeting rehearsals, the daily mental warm-up. And you don't feel guilty about important, incomplete projects; you did your best to finish them, but time ran out. Perhaps you could have drafted a few more letters? Never mind, this is your last day and you are going to wander around the building and make your final goodbyes. What's left in the in-tray can wait for your

successor. There will be no battles today; armistice has arrived.

When you arrive in the office your mood changes. Cleaning out the desk is a sombre event. What to do with once important and confidential, but now dated and seemingly irrelevant documents? Who really owns the gifts from visiting overseas dignitaries? What the heck, you do what you think best. The office staff seem pleased with offerings from past trips that are retrieved from cluttered drawers. Do you really want to take home a booklet on Confederate love songs bought at a flea market near Savannah a decade before?

With spirits on the rise you head off for the ritualistic ‘beating of the bounds’ around the hospital for the last time. You intend to say goodbye to everyone you can lay your shaking right hand on to, whether you knew them by name or by a smile and a nod of the head. However, time flies when you are saying goodbye, and you begin to realise that you need more than a day to visit every department. And many of the people with whom you are exchanging genuinely affectionate pleasantries will never be seen again, even though you are not too sure who you will meet up with in the future. And that will bring many surprises! When time runs out you are sorry that you missed so-and-so because they were at a meeting, sick or whatever. You hope that they are not upset that they were missed on this your final day, particularly when some of them provided strong personal support in the Byzantine world of hospital politics. Now your worlds are about to diverge and your mood becomes sombre once again. But there is still the farewell function in the evening and you must hurry home to change.

The ‘big farewell’ goes well, as they mostly do. All the heavies from around the hospital field are there, and you are delighted that they made the effort to attend during a very busy and tumultuous

Chris Richards was in retirement when he wrote this article for the *Australian Health Review*. We note with sadness that on 10 August 2004, at the age of 57, Chris passed away.

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period for the industry. All the invited speakers praise your achievements and omit your failings, as you knew they would. And you tell tales that omit corporate 'skeletons in the cupboard' that nevertheless have them rolling in the aisles, as you knew they would. You concentrate on avoiding the 'farewell tears' and are pleased (but later slightly disappointed) that they do not flow. You are euphoric once again. And the beat rolls on as a blues band pumps out the songs you have chosen.

But then in what seems a moment, those who gathered to pay you homage disappear into a cool Melbourne night. And you are left to look at your gifts and chat with the cleaning staff as you help them clear the hall. They are also generous in giving best wishes for the future, and the cleaning-up turns into an after-party. But then they leave and you are alone with your presents, pretty wrappings and a friend to act as the designated driver. In one way it is all over, but in another it isn't. Just like the Hotel California "you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave". It is the same with any organisation to which you gave your heart and soul (even though it may have broken the spirit that previously devoted all to the cause). In the future you will drive past a hospital and imagine that you are inside once again; in memory you will always be captive to the person who you once were. The moment has turned sombre once again.

Over the weekend you finalise arrangements for the "big trip". Then on a sunny Monday morning the "new you" (incorporating elements

inspired by Peter Fonda and Jack Kerouac) heads off on the journey of a lifetime to see Australia. You keep on remembering things that you didn't do and wonder whether you should ring the hospital. But then you remember that after so-and-so retired, everyone was irritated when he kept coming back to tidy up loose ends. They will really be irritated when they find out that you have also left loose ends, but much less so than if you turn into a retired pest. So you turn up the radio, sing along with whatever they play, and look at the world passing you by, even as it looks back at you passing it by.

You are now "officially" a has-been, but a relatively happy and contented one. Your battles are now over, but the war over expanding and changing patterns of service delivery with contracting budgets is eternal. You have checked out, but your thoughts remain with those inside still fighting the good fight, until they too decide (or have decided for them) that the Valhalla of the road is preferable to the unrelenting pressures to deliver even more with even less. Some hold on for longer than others, but in the end, one way or another, everyone 'jumps ship'. The trick is to build a raft and not dive into the brine. I did the former, and now live another life in another world where I retain mostly pleasant memories of the hospital field. I enjoy the 'life apart', even though the present is inextricably linked with the hospital manager I once was; I can never leave.

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