

# "DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

## "My memory fails me!"

Each month since coming to Mallorca I have had to pop back to the North East of England to honour some previous commitments and check over the homestead and remind myself how nice the weather is in Mallorca in case I should forget!

Funny how we forget things.

For instance, I am starting to write this month's piece in the air over France heading north and am sitting next to another commuter who now realises we have met before about ten years ago on a walking holiday in the English Lake District (North West England - well worth a visit!!). This man's memory is clearly better than mine but very pleasing to make the connection and the flight seemed even shorter with happy conversation.

Long-term memory is the most durable and this is why the very elderly can recall childhood memories in great detail (hm! wish I could remember that chance encounter on a beautiful hillside ten years ago). I had a great aunt who had childhood memories of another ancient forebear from the time of the Battle of Waterloo (military conflict in 1815 much remembered by the British but French friends may have a different view - if they remember! /si ils se souviennent!)

Short-term memory is a very sophisticated mechanism which is correspondingly much more delicate and more vulnerable to attack.

Sad memories gradually fade and their pain changes - different rather than less - "time heals". Otherwise we would be overloaded with the burden of the immediacy of everything that has gone wrong, particularly the big things. Happily the stark and overwhelming initial reaction slips back into the bearable background. - this is part of our normal humanity and is a barrier against depression discussed last month - but for the very big things, as someone else said, grief sleeps but never dies.

Memory hassles can be much more mundane - such as the underlying gnawing ache, or even sense of panic, when we know we have masses to do but cannot remember all the jobs in hand but we know, even on waking, that something is waiting for us on this particular day. The use of lists can cut through the muddle of a dozen half-remembered tasks.

One of my flight routines is to try to polish up my Spanish grammar and I am appalled at how much repetition I need to get a few facts to stick. Perhaps because it is more work than pleasure whereas reading for pleasure can be a fund of information for future conversation.

Some of these aids to remembering are just well proven non-medical advice but what are some medical angles for yachties?

Alcohol overuse can damage short term memory function as, for example, the person waking up after a hard night unable to remember where they have been the night before - that is a serious example but there is a spectrum of experience ranging from such total amnesia to partial memory loss eased by prompting from a friend who was there at the time.

Some prescribed drugs, such as benzodiazepines used as short-term treatment to calm anxiety or insomnia, can be used inappropriately and produce memory loss. Chemically similar but illicit drugs, such as found in spiked drinks, can cause severe short term memory loss and can set the scene for robbery or date rape. I had someone in a while ago who suspects that he and his friends divulged credit card pin numbers in a Palma club and lost a lot of money but cannot remember much of the later part of the evening out.

Concussion from a significant head injury can cause memory loss for the event and for some time after the event. The recovery can take weeks or months in serious cases and the memory returns for the more recent events and then works back gradually to the circumstances of the injury.

Ageing is one obvious example of short-term memory impairment and we can all identify with "senior moments" when we lose the plot for the lack of a word or a name.

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Alzheimer's dementia and other causes of more serious mental impairment can play havoc with memory and it is a condition of ageing which we all hope we will escape but we may have older family members who are suffering and this puts pressure on relatives whose life at sea takes them away for long periods of time. Modern telecommunications help but are not a substitute for being on hand and this can breed stress and guilt.

My final paragraph is shorter than planned because I cannot remember what I wanted to say!

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