

Flight of the Dodo Bird

By Dr Lee Kheng Hock

Are family doctors going the way of the Dodo? Not pleased with being compared to a mascot of dumbness, I did some research and found some similarities between our two hapless species.

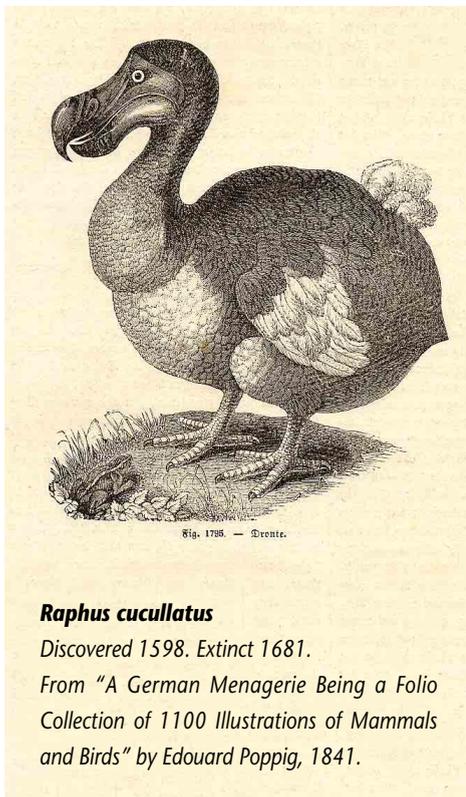
Dodo birds, scientifically known as the *Raphus cucullatus* were discovered around 1600 on Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. In a short span of 80 years since discovery, the Dodo was extinct.

Dodo Fact: In 1598, Portuguese sailors landing on the island of Mauritius discovered a new species of bird. Having no previous contact with human beings, the Dodo greeted the new visitors with a child-like innocence. The sailors mistook the gentle spirit of the Dodo and its lack of fear of the new predators as stupidity. They named the bird "doudo" which is archaic Portuguese meaning "simpleton". Others dispute this and said that the origin of the name is from the Dutch word "dodoor" which means "sluggard". Whatever your fancy, the choice is really between dumb and dumber.

GP Fact: The GPs who tried to practise ethically were often mistaken to be stupid by the agents of commercialisation. They cannot understand why GPs would leave money on the table and charge less than what the patients are prepared to pay. More incomprehensible is why they often help patients find lower cost alternatives that are clearly to the financial disadvantage of the GP. Altruism and professionalism are mistaken for stupidity. So managed care and savvy businessmen in the role of the cruel sailors discovered the Dodos and the rest is medical history.

Dodo Fact: Many Dodos were killed by the human visitors, and those that survived had to face the introduced animals. Rats, dogs and pigs came with the ships, got into the wild and soon became part of the fauna of the island's eco-system. These creatures destroyed the Dodos' nests, while humans destroyed the forests and their food source.

GP Fact: There are certainly more animals in the health care kingdom these days. A whole menagerie of practitioners that purportedly improve health now crowds the primary care eco-system, depleting the resources of the land without improving the landscape. There is indeed little sustenance



Raphus cucullatus

Discovered 1598. Extinct 1681.

From "A German Menagerie Being a Folio Collection of 1100 Illustrations of Mammals and Birds" by Edouard Poppig, 1841.

left for the honest GP who tries to eke out a living practising evidence-based medicine and trying to improve the health of his patients.

Dodo Fact: The Dodo's atrophied wings and its heavy, ungainly body tell us that the bird was flightless. Moreover, its breastbone was too small to support the huge pectoral muscles a bird this size would need to fly. Recent DNA studies of material retrieved from a Dodo specimen at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History showed that Dodos were descended from pigeons from South East Asia, another happy coincidence. When great, great grandfather Dodo landed on Mauritius, it found a habitat with plenty of food and no predators. It therefore did not need to fly, and, as flying takes a great

deal of energy, it was more efficient for the bird to remain on the ground. It became easy prey to humans who invaded their ecosystem and was overrun by the new animals that were introduced into their habitat.

GP Fact: GPs enter medical school as the cream of the crop of bright young A-level students. Many were even top students in medical school. It is well known that in the old days when the land was plentiful, the GPs easily thrive without bothering with the more difficult tasks of managing complicated cases. There was little competition. The good life and the easy pickings led to a loss of spirit and skills. Now the land is thin, pests proliferate and predators abound. The puny wings and atrophied muscles are useless. What is worse is that the will to fly is gone.

What lessons can we learn from the plight of the stupid Dodo? There is one final unproven fact about the Dodo that is perhaps the moral of the story. Legend has it that there are still Dodos left in this world. There had been claims of sightings of Dodos in the deep forests of Mauritius, living in isolation. An even more implausible legend said that some of the Dodos learned to fly again. Yes, when pigs can fly, everything is possible. So, what is the lesson for the GP?

Who said we are Dodos in the first place? We are not Dodos. Only some think and behave like Dodos. The final take home message is this: Do like the Dodo – die like one. It is time to learn how to fly. ■



About the author:

Dr Lee Kheng Hock is a GP in private practice since 1996. He was formerly a founding director of a managed care company. He had worked both in solo and group practices. He was the clinical director of a group practice. He is currently the Executive Director of the College of Family Physicians Singapore. He can be reached at jacobstable@gmail.com