

The right balance of sincerity and frivolity

Hardly a week goes by without some cause for celebration in the practice. **Stephen Hancocks** pops into the local card shop.

It depends on how many people there are in any particular team or practice but the chances are high that on several occasions throughout the year, perhaps today, you will have been asked to sign a card for one of your colleagues. So often it is a question of finding just the right words to pen. 'Happy Birthday' is of course entirely appropriate (assuming that it is someone's birthday and that you do actually wish it to be merry) but always feels slightly, well, obvious. Not that the other options are much less clichéd; 'Have a great day' would be acceptable if they weren't at work and if their partner wasn't off abroad on business, meaning that there is to be no special dinner or evening outing.

Then again 'May this be a wonderful year' sort of breaks the mould a bit but begins to sound rather like the corny printed jingles in certain types of tacky cards. Rhyming ones are probably worse still. 'A happy day for a wonderful chum, you often remind me of my dear Mum' is clearly written with great affection but is in dire danger of being horribly misinterpreted.

Leaving cards can be either very sad to have to sign if they mark the departure of a valued workmate or a moment for

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ecstatic (if entirely subdued) glee that you will never have to smell the tuna and chutney sandwiches or dodge past the rusty old bike leant against the staff room back door of old so-and-so ever again. 'Best wishes in your new job' you write gingerly. (If only they knew what they were letting themselves in for.) For the same reason, leaving 'dos' can be similarly poignant or awkward, on the one hand genuinely anticipating missing them or on the other desperately trying to stay polite while really wanting to let rip.

Then there are engagements and weddings. Other minefields await, although this time it can be cards from the bride or groom team members form of invitations ... or not. It is perfectly understandable that not everyone can be invited but can you believe it, she's asked Yvonne but not Miriam? What is she thinking? Yvonne! Although to be honest, there are times when work colleagues can feel a bit

isolated in an otherwise family environment. 'Oh, you're the hygienist who keeps hamsters, yes, we've heard a lot about you' can be a somewhat disarming comment as you munch through a slab of wedding cake, even though Aunt Maud means it kindly.

With the advent of computer programs that allow you to make your own cards as well as manipulate all sorts of images the sky is the limit if there is a techno-wizard in the practice. Suddenly 'congratulations on passing your driving test' is fronted by the successful candidate apparently steering an eight-axle juggernaut across Tower Bridge with the rest of the team standing on the cab roof executing a Mexican wave. 'You've got a new home' has an image of the happily installed first time buyer seemingly standing beside a slum in a far off city with a dental unit and assorted cabinetry poking out from what would be a kitchen, if there were a kitchen.

Such self-made greetings are useful for creating cards for combined occasions which it is just never possible to buy otherwise. Try to scour the shops for one which celebrates having a new baby on your third wedding anniversary or passing your exams, commiserating on the loss of a pet and wishing happy Eid. The chances are slim.

In terms of signing cards there is also the danger that fellow team members will read what you've scrawled before it gets sealed in the envelope for the presentation. However well you try to engineer it that you get the last word, inevitably a badly timed phone call or a chatty patient messes up your carefully laid plan. Although being the 'first' is also a worry. Whereabouts should you start? In the middle of the opening page? In a tiny top left hand corner of the inside cover? Where is the spot for the boss? Surely the practice manager should have thought of all of this ... oh, she's already written 'have a great day'. Loser.

But, back to the matter of what to write that isn't too slushy, can't be construed as cold and yet strikes the right balance of sincerity and frivolity. Oh, damn it surely this year it won't matter, you'll think of something much wittier next September. 'Happy Birthday!'

