

Letter from Glasgow

THE REUNION

I was wondering how many times in my life I have been to Edinburgh, as I travelled to it from my home in Glasgow. The answer is many, many times, but I'm not sure precisely how many. The two cities are only 44 miles apart, but in some respects, they could be in different countries. At the risk of generalising, Edinburgh is more genteel, and Glasgow is a post-industrial city. The way that translates itself is that people in Edinburgh are a bit more reticent to talk and engage, whilst people in Glasgow are more willing. The urban myth is that if you ask a person in Edinburgh a question, you will get an answer, although it may be curt, but if you ask someone in Glasgow, you'll end up chatting to them over a beer or cup of tea. As they say, generalisations and urban myths have an element of truth in them.

As readers of the Letter may know, I went to Glasgow in 1962, aged five, when my parents migrated there from India. My parents were 'economic migrants' in the current parlance, and the purpose of coming to Scotland was to offer their three children greater educational opportunities. After going to school in Glasgow, I decided I needed 44 miles between my parents' house and my student life and went east to study medicine in Edinburgh in 1975.

In those days, Edinburgh offered a 6-year MBChB course with the first year effectively a 'pre-medical' year of biology, chemistry, and physics. With an exemption from physics, I spent a fruitful year studying social anthropology instead. After six eventful years, I graduated in 1981. Collectively, the 140 medical graduates of 1981 are known as Final Year Club 81 (FYC 81). After graduation, I stayed another 4 years in Edinburgh, which included undertaking general practice training, and finally moved back to Glasgow in 1985 to pursue training and a career in public health. In total, I spent 10 years doing missionary work in Edinburgh, trying to civilise them, but returned to Glasgow having failed miserably! As FYC 81 colleagues went on their different paths in medicine (and beyond), we were always tied to FYC 81.

When the FYC 81 reunions were organized, some ignored the call to reconvene, but most have attended at least one of the four reunions to date. At our fourth reunion, in November 2025, it was 44 years since we graduated. You'll note that this is not a number ending in '0' because our 40-year reunion fell victim to the pandemic. So we had our 44-year reunion, thanks to the hard work of the organisers, Carol and Anne, in Edinburgh; 48 colleagues from FYC 81 attended.

The programme included a visit in the afternoon to the rebuilding work of the student union, Teviot Row, which was a key focus for FYC 81 student social life. Teviot Row was also the site of two demonstrations in which I participated as a student. The first, against George Ward, the owner of a film developing company, against whom the mainly South Asian women workforce went on strike during the bitter Grunwick dispute. The second was the successful action led by Edinburgh University Women's Group to stop strippers (striptease performers) from appearing at a 'student function'. Teviot Row will become an impressive and accessible space for students when it is finished, and it will also be used during the Edinburgh International Festival and Festival

Fringe as a venue.¹ This was followed by a talk and tour of the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI).² The EFI is situated in the former surgical wards of the old Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (RIE). It was due to become a hotel, but after several years of inaction and the building falling into disrepair, the University of Edinburgh bought it and turned it into 'a space for multi-disciplinary collaboration, education, research, and partnership,' which is open to the whole community in Edinburgh. It was fascinating to see the surgical Nightingale wards where we were students and some of us worked as doctors, being totally transformed. A colleague, let's call him Charles (not his real name) who is a retired surgeon, reminisced about the patient trolley races in the RIE corridors he engaged in, reinforcing in my mind that surgeons are a different species. Time will tell if the major resources invested in the EFI achieve its objectives. I hope so because I was impressed at the design of the building, its imaginative use of space, and the number of people using it. The day was rounded off by a dinner in the ostentatious 18th-century Edinburgh City Chambers.

I was a little anxious about the Reunion as I travelled to Edinburgh. It may be that a few weeks before it, I woke up on a couple of occasions during the night, sweating and having the same dream. I dreamt that I was at the Reunion, and on both occasions, the only detail I can remember is the face of one of my friends in FYC 81, who, sadly, died several years ago. Perhaps I was reflecting on those colleagues who never made it to the Reunion. I'll leave that to the psychiatrists in FYC 81 to ponder. The other memory that came back to me was that I, together with a few friends, decided the Graduation Dinner in 1981 in Prestonfield House Hotel was too posh for us, and we had our own celebration in a friend's apartment.

But I need not have been anxious. With the excellent information compiled by Anne, there were lots of ice-breakers to chat, and people mixed well. I found everyone was open, engaging, and friendly. I reflected on what one of my colleagues said at the dinner. He opined that most people were in their late sixties and were relatively relaxed. They had accomplished what they wanted to do medically, and most had retired, so there was no undercurrent of competitiveness. I sense we were also thinking about our colleagues who had died and appreciated our own fortune of being able to get together. One quirky observation I had was recognizing people from their voices as they chatted standing behind you. You could almost close your eyes and be transported 44 years into the past...

It was interesting seeing the different paths people had taken professionally and in retirement. As expected, FYC 81 colleagues are represented in all the medical specialties. Most stayed to work in the UK, whilst others ventured abroad. Talking to one of my 'cadaver' colleagues (dissecting a body over the course of a year is a sure way to bond), I concurred as she noted the modesty of some of the high flyers in FYC 81 who, by any objective standard, had achieved a lot medically and academically. I would place on record that I am definitely not a FYC 81 high flyer!

I usually have a spring in my step when I visit Edinburgh. I know the city, have friends who live there, and I think

about the various places in Edinburgh I have lived, studied, worked, and enjoyed myself. This time, after I got over my initial trepidation, it was no different, and I enjoyed myself all the more at the Reunion. So roll on our 50th, and perhaps last, Reunion, pandemics permitting.

REFERENCES

1 Teviot Row House Development. Available at <https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/about/teviotrowhouseredevlopment> (accessed on 22 Nov 2025).

2 Edinburgh Futures Institute. Available at <https://efi.ed.ac.uk/> (accessed on 22 Nov 2025).

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[To cite: Kohli H. The Reunion (Letter from Glasgow). *Natl Med J India* 2026;**39**:55–6. DOI: 10.25259/NMJI_2041_2025]
