

Commentary**When should surgeons retire? (*Br J Surg* 2016; 103: 35–42)**

When asked to comment on this excellent review my first response was 'Why me?'. Perhaps the editor thought that as a senior member of the profession, and one who of late has transitioned from clinical practice into other areas, I might give a balanced view. For most surgeons reaching the twilight of their surgical career the thought of retirement can be challenging. A busy clinical practice has often failed to prepare for a life away from patients and the operating theatre, so there is a natural desire to prolong it as long as possible. There is little doubt from the evidence reviewed that ageing does

affect surgical ability, but this is a generic finding and clearly there is significant individual variation. These findings should not be used as an argument for a compulsory retirement age. However, the decision to depart from the clinical arena cannot be left to the individual, who may well lack insight. We are all familiar with colleagues who have had glittering careers, only for their reputation to be marred in their declining years because they have failed to appreciate when the time was right to step back from the frontline. Those who do have the insight will often gradually reduce taking on major cases, and concentrate more on teaching, mentoring or managerial roles.

Appraisal and revalidation recently introduced into the UK provide the mechanism to make this transition possible. However, from my observation, this system is often not robust enough in many instances to deal with the individuals who lack insight. The review comments on how this problem is being dealt with in some North American cities, which have introduced confidential physical and cognitive evaluations of surgical performance. I suspect that in this age of transparency, with a greater focus on safety, such surgical MOTs will eventually become the norm in many healthcare systems including that in the UK, but I can already hear the clamour of protest!

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Disclosure

The author declares no conflict of interest.

