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The golden age

Reviewing Henry Marriott's *Bedside Cardiac Diagnosis*, John Hampton wonders whether "the great men of cardiology and other specialties such as neurology have gone without being replaced by a younger generation, their memories sacrificed on the altar of the echocardiogram and the computed tomography scanner" (p 595). But does this loss matter if the end result is more patients correctly diagnosed and managed?

Doctors at the Children's Hospital, Camperdown, New South Wales, also regret the declining art of clinical diagnosis. For one condition, pyloric stenosis, they didn't find that the increasing use of imaging techniques brought any compensatory improvements (p 553). It didn't lead to earlier diagnosis, and doctors'

skills in diagnosing the condition clinically atrophied. So was there really a golden age of clinical medicine when doctors took better histories and conducted better clinical examinations? It's worth reading this week's paper on cystic fibrosis with this question in mind (p 549). When the condition was described in 1938—somewhere in the middle of this golden age of clinical skills—its prognosis was a few months. Now it's over 20 years and rising. The improvement has less to do with doctors' skills in history taking and examination than with the painstaking introduction and assessment of changes in the condition's management. The great men of yore, it turns out, still had something to learn.