Ed Bonner considers

The case for... and against Returnment

W hat is ‘returnment’? Very simply, it is the act of returning to work after one has retired. Now, I know many people whose entire working lives have been devoted to arriving at that magical moment when they clear their desks or instrument drawers or whatever, attend the farewell drinks celebration of their years of diligence and hard work, and wave goodbye for the last time to those they have worked with for so long. With the first installment of their hard-earned pensions about to grace their bank account, they are all set to head for the golf course or bowling green while it is in Merton, Margate or Majorca. Just think, never having to worry ever again whether that crown will fit, never having to listen ever again to some ancient biddy complaining about her lower denture rubbing on her gums.

The perfect scenario? Lot to be said for that – having time for the garden, the grandchildren and the geographical locations you have always wanted to visit; having heaps of quality time to spend with your spouse with whom you have spent so many years not spending time. Or even to settle down and write that novel that has been tossing around in the back of your mind for so long. Or learn to play the guitar, easier because your fingers are still supple and loose, or sculpt (dentistry is a form of mini-sculpting). What could be nicer?

But halt awhile! All may not be rosy in the garden of retirement. In the first instance, your spouse will have had about 40 years of being used to not having you under his/her feet, of not having you chattering away at breakfast, lunch and dinner, of not having to ask if you want tea every three hours, and, perish the thought, of not being asked if they fancied a roll in the hay twice a day.

Then, think about all that knowledge you have accumulated. What to do with it? Let it wither, or put it to some really useful use: teach? You always got on well with young people and would certainly find telling what really works (compared to what the theorists thought really worked) quite rewarding. Write your memoirs? Bet you could spin some amazing stories that you have accumulated over the years! Write articles such as ‘The case for... and against’ for a dental magazine?

Go back to your practice a couple of mornings a week just to keep your hand in on those few patients who truly believed that you walked on water? Take on locums where you can work for a couple of weeks at a stretch in between your trips to golf on the Algarve or ski in Tignes? That would definitely keep you in petty cash and your hand in and you off the street. Whatever you decide to do, do something, unless you literally want to die of boredom after you have completed your 1,000th crossword.

Keep on achieving

It is an established fact that our minds if left unemployed wither as quickly as our bodies as we age; yet if put to use, can achieve extra-ordinary things. The author of these thoughts has often wondered why great pianists and other musicians, composers, artists and authors live to a grand old age, no matter how dissolve their lives, and has come to the conclusion that it is due to the following factors: (i) they can continue do what they do, and do it well, even if in a modified form; (ii) they have more things to do than time to do them; (iii) they retain their sense of self-worth; (iv) they enjoy the challenge of re-inventing themselves concentrating on using their retained strengths rather than dwelling on their fading faculties; and (v) they become revered role-models providing they retain their sense of humour (Katherine Hepburn said that if you survived long enough, you would be revered – rather like an old building).

Can’t remember who it was who said old age is not for sissies, but it was definitely Norman Vincent Peale who said: ‘Live your life and forget your age!’ The immortal Mae West said something similar: ‘You’re never too old to become younger!’ and there’s nothing that keeps you younger than going back to work when you don’t have to. That’s returnment.