

PROFESSORS AND PIES

Northwick is a very special bear. He lives with a boy called Frank and his family. Both Northwick and Frank have nystagmus.

It was the first time Frank had ever met a professor. Before going to the hospital, his parents explained that professors were very clever people who knew almost everything. Most professors had beards and wore bow ties, his father added, and then had to explain what a bow tie was.

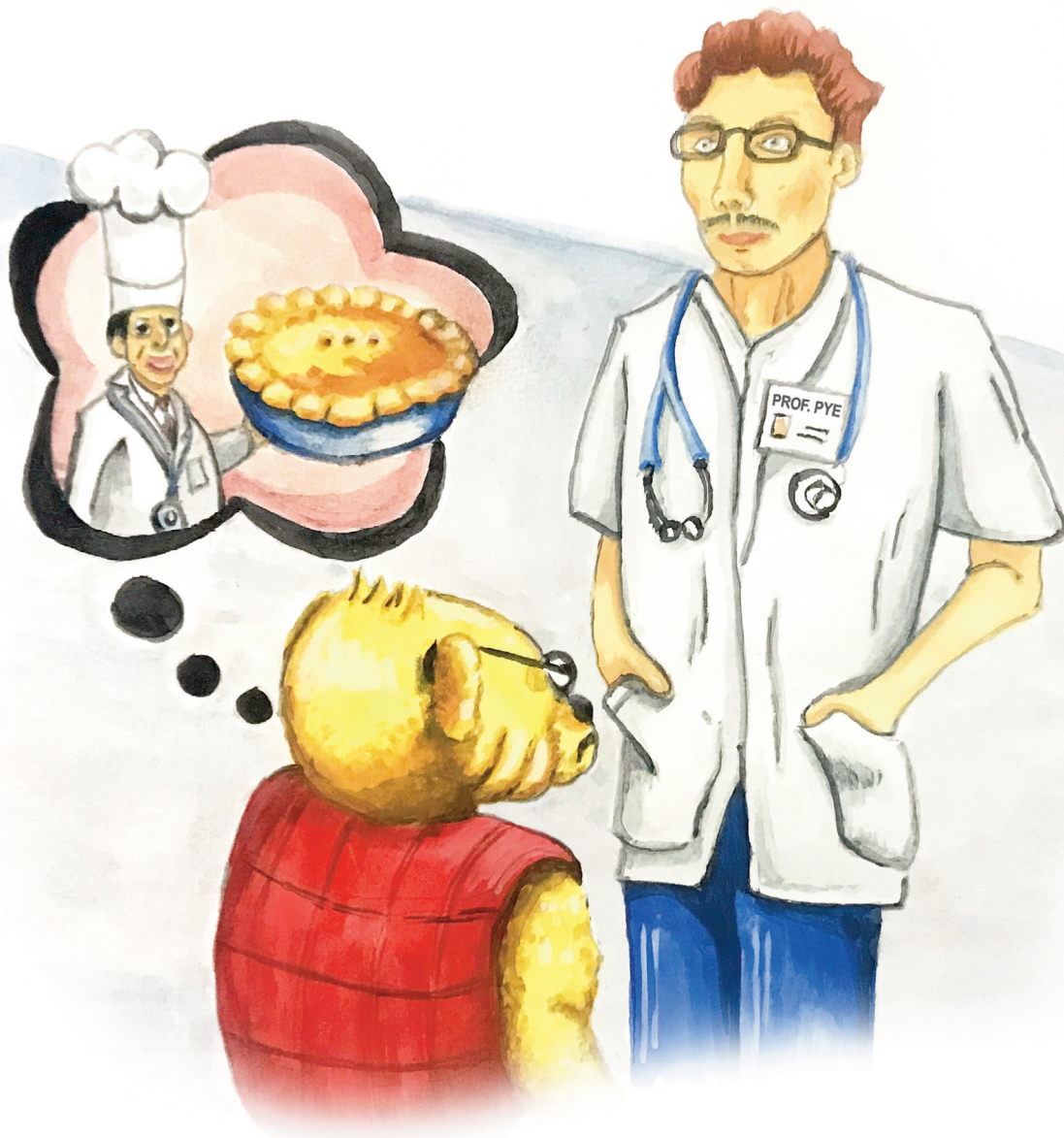
Frank, his parents and Northwick had gone to the hospital so that Professor Pye could look at Frank's eyes. The Professor had a beard, but no bow tie. In fact he didn't wear a tie at all. He worked in a room he called a Lab which even Northwick noticed was quite untidy. It was full of computers, screens, bits of paper, books and old coffee cups.

Frank's father wanted to know if Professor Pye was going to test how many letters Frank could see like they did at the optician. The Professor said that reading letters didn't tell you much about what people with nystagmus saw. "They need more time to see, their vision changes all the time and they might have a null zone. I sometimes think people pay far too much attention to simple tests of distance vision."

Question time

Then the Professor asked if he could examine Frank's eyes with some of the equipment in his Lab. He promised they could stop whenever Frank wanted. "And before we carry on, Frank, do you have any questions for me?" asked Professor Pye.

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Frank thought carefully, then said yes, he did. "My parents said professors know almost everything. So can you tell me why Northwick and I have nystagmus and will it ever get better, will you be able to cure it?"

Professor Pye leant back in his big reclining chair and twisted his fingers together. "Those are excellent questions, Frank. And it's very kind of your parents to suggest that professors know almost everything, but sadly it's not true. In fact, the more I learn, the more I realise how little I actually know."

"But it is true that I know a bit about nystagmus, although not everything. For instance, you and Northwick know more than I do about what it's like to actually have nystagmus. I can't be sure why you have

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nystagmus, but by looking at your eyes I might find the answer to that question. And, no unfortunately I can't cure nystagmus. But I hope that what I'm doing might help us find a treatment or cure one day. So, shall we start?"

Frank said yes and spent the next hour looking at pictures and little red lights and strange patterns. It didn't hurt, but it did get quite tiring and even boring after a while, so Frank was very glad when Professor Pye suggested they stop for a break.

Cake break

Northwick too had found it boring sitting in the Lab watching Frank. And being bored of course made the bear hungry. So, seeing his chance, Northwick asked Professor Pye a question he'd asked in a hospital once before, but to which he had never had a proper answer. "Professor, I hope you don't mind me asking, but do you know if nystagmus makes you hungry?"

"Now, that's yet another question I'm afraid I can't answer," Professor Pye said with a smile. "I did mention earlier that I don't know everything. But I do know the way to the cafeteria! So why don't we all go there now for a snack? They have some very good pies and cakes, so at least I can stop you being hungry for a while. Even if I can't stop your nystagmus -- or answer all of your questions!"

(This story originally appeared in a Nystagmus Network newsletter in 2011)