

Singing the Blues and The Beatles

by **Marika Azzopardi**

There is more to a histopathologist than meets the eye. And Dr James De Gaetano is an ideal example. Meeting him after a long day at the laboratory, he explains the ins and outs of his profession with enthusiasm.

“My work involves microscopic work on a diagnostic level. Basically I have to examine tissue extracted from patients after exploratory interventions and most of the times it heavily revolves around diagnosing cancer.”

Dr De Gaetano admits the work is very difficult and intense, basically because it involves making highly responsible decisions around people’s lives. “The cases I deal with are mostly paediatric which makes for an added responsibility. The work calls for determining decisions – Is the growth benign or malignant? How serious is this? How should it be handled? Any decision made by me will eventually reflect on the patient’s life from then onwards. It can certainly bog you down. Having said that, however, I thoroughly enjoy it.”

Not many doctors are interested in the field of histopathology and hence there are not many histopathologists around. Basically this could be traced down to the fact that most doctors look forward to patient contact which is non-existent in this speciality. One only gets to observe closely whatever is at the other end of the microscope and patients are only referred to as names. “That is something most doctors aren’t too eager about. Moreover the work is particularly hard and requires several years of study. One needs a minimum of five years to specialise. Usually study is carried out partly in Malta and



partly abroad, generally in the UK. In my case, I took up a fellowship in Australia.”

Working constantly on the microscope can be very demanding, and Dr De Gaetano admits it can be pretty exhausting mentally. And so, to relieve the stress, he branched out into something completely different. In fact James De Gaetano is the leading vocalist in a band of (predominantly) doctors or medically-related professions – The Quacks.





With a name that parodies the medical profession, one can gauge that this can't really be serious business and is just an excuse for these professionals to let their hair down. But whatever the reason, the band has been going strong for the past decade or so and it was about two years old when Dr De Gaetano came to know of it. "It was nearly eight Christmases ago. We had been invited to a fundraising activity at St Luke's Hospital just before Christmas and The Quacks were playing. At the time the group was just doing instrumentals and playing 'Shadows' music mostly. I just walked up to the guitarists and asked if they needed a soloist."

Drawing on his many years as a Voices component and his 1991 solo performance with this well-known choir, James De Gaetano felt it could be fun. And it all fell in place when he was contacted just two days later. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today the members of The Quacks whose ages span from the early 20s through to the late 50s, include himself as lead vocalist, Anthony Bernard (orthopaedic surgeon) as lead guitarist, Malcolm Crockford (radiologist) as rhythm guitarist, Mario Mifsud (radiographer) as bass guitarist, Adrian Curmi Dimech (a non-medical – "he doctors the accounts") as drummer, Antonella Bernard (another non-medical – Anthony Bernard's better half) as backing vocalist, and Nicky Farrugia (nurse) as backing vocalist.

The Quacks boast a specific genre of music – 60s and 70s songs and all the golden oldies courtesy of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Monkeys and the like.

"We play strictly at fundraising events. We've done Caritas, Din l-Art Helwa, Hospice, Guh fl-Afrika and others. We did the August Moon Ball once but I guess that was the most formal event we've done so far and whilst we had to dress up to the nines, I'm not quite sure the invitees could actually waltz to our music. Most of the time, we just present ourselves in jeans and tees – it's that laid back and we do tend to start

fooling around. And no, we don't get paid but we do get fed!"

Their individual busy schedules do not allow for more than a weekly rehearsal late on Sunday night accompanied by a bottle of good wine, and whilst they all enjoy a much awaited break during the summer, come autumn, their rehearsals resume with regularity with one extra practice night thrown in mid-week just before an event. "It takes time to build up a repertoire. At the moment we have about 50 songs in our repertoire plus some 10 'Shadows' instrumentals. Sometimes we think we'd like to have a pianist which would allow us a much wider portfolio. I know there are several doctors who are pretty good pianists. But so far we never recruited any." ☒

