

## 26. *Never Underestimate the Importance of Detail*

SIR Arthur Conan Doyle received his medical degree from Edinburgh University in 1881 but, finding his early practice slow, turned to writing and in his spare time created a detective genius in Sherlock Holmes. In a foggy gaslit 1890 London, Holmes, rumbling over cobblestones in a hansom while collecting clues or at 221B Baker Street in dressing gown with calabash pipe and magnifying glass fitting these clues into the puzzle, outwitted the cleverest criminals of the late-Victorian-early-Edwardian era. Through the same fog and over the same cobblestones, William Rose and Edmund Owen trudged to and from the London hospitals, but, lacking in Holmesian *observation* and *intuitive inference*, they were still concerning themselves with straight-line or distorted broken-line lip closures. Across the Channel in Germany, Hagedorn had surpassed their best efforts. Yet Sherlock Holmes, had his attention been directed to the cleft lip problem for but a moment, might have hastened the advances needed for the surgical solution of the puzzle. He explained the secret of success quite simply:

[My dear Watson] They say that genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains.

A plastic surgeon correcting the embryological catastrophe of a cleft lip uses methods which parallel those employed by a detective solving a crime. The missing bit is the criminal, and what tissue is available, including the landmarks, provides the clues. Then by collecting and piecing together what is there with "infinite pains" and using every available millimeter, the surgeon finds the solution to the mystery.



It always seems to amaze observers that it takes me as long as it does to deal with the detail involved in rotating and advancing the lip and nasal elements. A millimeter here or there is vital, and even when first measurements suggest accuracy, the trained eye may find a flaw. It is then that the inherent patient persistence of a perfectionist invariably will compel suture removal, realignment and resuture. To the hurried surgeon, whether on account of too heavy an operative schedule or his insistence on speed rather than precision, this concern over trivia may seem ridiculous. He must wonder, with so many clefts in the world being improved in appearance and function, what real difference one more millimeter can make?

In his 1961 presidential address, Herb Conway repeated the classic story about the child who was asked:

With all the hundreds of millions of people in the world, what difference does it make at all to the world if one man be killed?

The child replied:

I suppose it would not make any difference at all to the world but it would make all the difference in the world to that one man!

And it is the same with every cleft, for as standards rise so also does the importance of detail. Generalizations may point the way, but without explicit and minute detail there can be no finesse.

Michelangelo put it another way, and if he still had the patience, after lying on his back on a scaffold for more than four years painting 343 masterpieces from the Book of Genesis on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, to say,

Trivials make perfection but perfection is not trivial,

it might be well for us all to pause and reconsider . . .

Enough of history, principles and discussion. It is now time to turn to the actual detail of corrective surgery on incomplete unilateral clefts. As Holmes would say,

Come, Watson, come! The game is afoot.

*a Goldwyn find*