

BILL FRANKLAND

The eminent allergy specialist is not only still with us, but, aged 100, still treating patients and speaking at international conferences. Interview by **LEILA HADDOU**



What's his secret? World famous allergy specialist, 100-year-old Dr Bill Frankland, still sees patients and jets off to international conferences. Sitting in his Harley Street flat, which doubles as a consulting room, he answers the question: his secret is simply a matter of luck.

'It's a miracle I'm still alive,' he says. 'I've had so many near-death experiences.' Being born a twin weighing only 3lbs 1 ounce was dodgy in itself, but, he says, his first real stroke of luck was avoiding scarlet fever, which claimed the lives of his sister and two uncles.

He had another episode of immense

fortune during his training when he went for an interview in an eye clinic. 'I had no interest in eyes, but I saw a pretty young blonde when I arrived. I thought I'd better do well so I could get to know her.' He got the job and married the pretty blonde, Pauline, in 1941. She died in 2002, a heartbreak he has met with fortitude and determination to carry on living.

He joined the army at the start of the second world war, and was given 'unthinkable responsibilities'. He escaped death again during the Blitz when treating an officer's wife who had sprained her ankle. On hearing the air raid sirens he feared the hospital might be a target, so took her outside to one of the drains

for shelter, where a bomb just missed them. He burned his fingers on a piece of shrapnel but, extraordinarily, this was his only war injury, despite spending the next few years of his life as a prisoner of war.

His first posting abroad was to Singapore, already under siege by the Japanese, where he was to endure 'three and a half years of hell'. The troops came under constant mortar fire and the colonel of his regiment was decapitated. He cared for the wounded in Changi Hospital and narrowly dodged death again. 'There were two of us doctors, and three days before Pearl Harbor we had to decide who would leave to work in a new hospital at Alexandra in the south west and who would remain at Changi.' They tossed a coin and Dr Frankland remained. The doctor who went to the new hospital was murdered there on 14th February 1942 in a Japanese killing frenzy known as the Alexandra Hospital Massacre.

The day after the massacre the British forces in Singapore surrendered to the Japanese and Changi Prison became a holding camp for soldiers before they were sent out to work on the railways. Life was grim. 'We officers were lined up and bashed hard if the men misbehaved,' says Dr Frankland. 'The best bashing I ever had, I didn't feel a thing – I was just knocked straight out.' When he came round, concussed and confused, he staggered towards a Japanese officer with clenched fists. Just as one of the guards raised his bayonet to kill him, a senior Japanese officer intervened, saying they needed all the doctors they could get.

He continued to care for his fellow soldiers until the war was over. The troops were asked if they would like to see a psychiatrist when they returned to England. 'The only person I need to see is my wife,' Dr Frankland told them.

After the war he specialised in allergies. He worked with Sir Alexander Fleming but the two didn't always see eye to eye. Writing a chapter for a medical textbook which was

sent to Fleming for editing. Frankland was surprised to find that his prescient statement that an increase in the use of penicillin would lead to an increase in allergy to the drug had been altered by Professor Fleming. The new version said: 'With increasing purity of penicillin, allergy will become less common.'

Despite his return to medicine, the adventures didn't stop. Because of his expertise in the early days of penicillin his opinion was often sought, and in the late 1970s he was asked by government officials to go abroad on a mysterious mission. He was told only that he would receive VIP treatment and that his destination was Benghazi, Libya. However the plane landed in Nairobi and he had to make his own way to Libya. Only then did he discover what his mission entailed: 'This was about a patient who had died as a result of taking penicillin and I was to be an advocate judge.' The victim had been a personal advisor to the Libyan prime minister. The doctor who administered the drug was a friend of the Italian prime minister. Tensions between the two leaders had been mounting. 'Should he be shot or hung?' was the question Dr Frankland was asked. Luckily, the doctor was sent to prison instead.

A pioneering allergist, Frankland introduced the system of pollen count on which many hay fever sufferers now rely. But he's a modest, humorous man and says that outside of his career, his greatest achievement was beating his friend in a race at Oxford and winning sixpence. He went on to run in university championships. 'It gave me more stimulus than anything else. Due to a bet, I was shown that I could achieve something I didn't think I could do.'

He speaks for many when, reflecting on old age, he acknowledges that while you may be handed accolades, you are also subject to enforced invisibility in a society that continues to exclude older people. 'Your family may think you're just an old fool, so it was nice being made an honorary fellow at my old college at the age of 99 – it gave me a boost.'

He looks at the clock – he has an appointment. The secret to his longevity isn't just to trick fate and dodge death in the way he has done, but to simply keep going. Age is no reason to sit down and give up. 'What would I do if I didn't work?' he asks. His advice to the rest of us? 'Live in the present, and don't take anything for granted.'



MIND THE ^{AGE} GAP

Lizzie Enfield

I AM SHOWING signs of age and hunting for my glasses. They're not where I left them and I'm not wearing them without realising, so I go to retrieve my spare pair from beside the bed. I can't see them either. I can't see anything much and I've got work to do.

'You don't think your son hid them, do you?' I ask my husband. 'In retaliation for my hiding his iPod?'

He's my child when he scores high in a maths test, my husband's when he's being a pain, which he was. He hit his sister. Bad behaviour warranted strong action: confiscating his iPod was the best I could think of.

'You have to be inventive these days,' my father mused. 'If you beat your children or send them to their room with no dinner they'll probably call social services.'

He's right, of course. They know their rights. We didn't even have rights, let alone know them, but my offspring know that beyond threatening to cut off their allowances or confiscating their belongings, there's not a great deal I can do to punish their behaviour.

'He's not that devious,' my husband says as I continue to wonder if my son has hidden my specs.

I go to the chemist to buy reading glasses and bump into my son's classroom assistant. I explain my mission and my suspicion, and tell her my husband is sure he's not that devious.

'Oh I think he is,' she says cheerfully.

She should know. She's been in a classroom with him for six hours a day all year. That's a lot more time that he's spent with his dad.

My ten-year-old boy treads a fine line between sparky and really pushing it. If he'd been born fifty years earlier he'd have been beaten regularly by now, but the worst that's happened to him at school is losing 'golden time'. This doesn't bother him. He likes work so he's happy to carry on during the twenty minutes they're given to do what they please.

They're only given it so it can be taken away – the ultimate sanction in a sanction-free school. My eldest daughter lost golden time just once during her

entire time in the juniors – for carrying on working when she was supposed to be tidying up. Her stepping out of line is always industrious.

She recently went to London with a friend and failed to tell me that the 'her dad is taking us' plan had changed and they were going alone.

I try to tell this story to give the impression that they got up to all sorts of heinous things without an adult chaperon; I build the tension by saying they had no money, no idea where they were headed, had never been to London by themselves before and were only fourteen. I want people to expect terrible tales of underage sex and drug-taking. If they do, the punch line works better: 'They went to see the Hockney Exhibition at the Royal Academy, bought some postcards and came home again.'

She does flout minor rules, though, shrugging when I ask why she's not wearing the required school uniform: 'There's nothing they can do about it.'

She's right. Even expulsion, the ultimate punishment, is a blessing in disguise.

There's a sort of excluded pupil exchange scheme at her large comprehensive. The school is oversubscribed but she has a new boy in her class, flown in after he was kicked out of his less popular school for dealing drugs in his lunch hour.

'I'm going to appeal,' a parent tells me when their child fails to get into the popular school.

'Or get him to deal drugs,' I suggest. 'It's quicker than appealing.'

I wonder if we should send my son to the less popular school so that he can go to the better one if he gets kicked out.

'Do you like these new glasses?' I ask when he comes home.

'Are they new?' he deflects the question with a question, the true mark of a devious mind.

'Yes. I can't find my others.'

'I know where they are,' he replies coolly. 'I'll tell you if you give me back my iPod. I need it.'

I know what he needs, but I can only think it. My parents would have meted it out.