The word exposure is now being used routinely by UK medical educationalists to mean general practice teaching or placements in general practices, with, for example, Lambert et al1 in an important article this year even using it in an academic questionnaire. This immediately raises questions about the meaning and connotations of the word. The Oxford English Dictionary2 defines it in two ways, one of which is neutral (the way in which something is situated, a surface laid open to review), but also gives examples of the word being associated with unmasking of wrongdoers and insurance companies dealing with risk.

The word is widely used in the medical literature and the lay press to refer to contamination with potentially harmful substances. Recent examples include: ‘Occupational exposure to heavy metals poisoning: Scottish lead mining’3 and ‘Psychiatric disorders after prenatal antidepressant exposure.’4 Furthermore, this word is used in national newspapers, for example a front-page headline in The Times (21 August 2017): ‘Children exposed to huge rise in gambling adverts’.5

General practitioners are the doctors who see the greatest number of patients of all ages, both sexes and all socio-economic groups. General practitioners rely more than most doctors on listening and talking with their patients. Narrative medicine, the study of words and language, is a subset of communication skills and has been particularly developed by academic general practitioners (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998).6 Therefore, general practitioners in particular are fascinated by the words their patients use and the connotations associated with them. Metaphors are often how mankind communicates meaning through a limited number of words.

THE CONNOTATIONS OF EXPOSURE

The connotation of exposure being bad news is not new. The ancients murdered babies by exposing them to the elements and Wilfred Owen’s famous poem from 1917 ‘Exposure’7 is now 100 years old and describes soldiers dying of cold.

There are some positive connotations of exposure in a small number of cases, particularly in relation to the arts world. The exposure of camera film to make a picture or the exposure of new talent to useful publicity are both examples.

It is, however, clear from both the scientific articles and those in the lay press, that the main connotation of the word exposure is negative. It is most usually used in relation to something bad or harmful to humans from which human beings may suffer or die.

Another common use of the word is in the term ‘indecent exposure’, which is an inappropriate and often illegal activity.

Given these predominantly negative associations, the question arises of why this word was ever used in the first place. It seems to go back to the early days of medical education, which was almost entirely hospital based, and to a concept that general practice is hospital medicine practised outside hospital. The early thinking was to broaden
the experience and the setting but it was not then understood that general practice was a distinct research-based branch of medicine that needed to be taught in its own right. The value of working in people’s homes and in poorer communities was understood but seen as secondary. This thinking is related to the common use by hospital doctors of the word general practice ‘experience’ as opposed to general practice ‘teaching’. Thus ‘exposure’ to general practice is seen as similar to putting tender plants outside for short periods to harden them off.

Another important connation is that people are exposed to things from which they would normally or optimally be separated.

General practice seems to be the only branch of medicine where the word is frequently used in medical education. Examples of students being ‘exposed’ to other subjects are rare. The implication is that hospital-based medicine is the normal and optimal situation.

Exposure implies passivity and having something done to one. Being a passive observer is undesirable in the current medical education world where active student involvement is encouraged.

**APPROPRIATE WORDING**

The word is unnecessary as there are a whole range of adjectives and nouns that are available to describe the teaching of general practice. The word exposure in effect blurs the topic and indeed it is not quite clear if it is used for general practice teaching or the setting of learning in general practice.

Good academic practice fosters clarity in the use of words and terms, and although the word is clear in relation to pollutants or drugs, it is ambiguous and potentially harmful in relation to medical education. Appropriate and more precise wording needs to be used such as ‘teaching in and on general practice’.

What is clear is that it has slipped into widespread use and has been used by Deans, general practice leads in medical schools and medical students, who seem to think it is some kind of technical term.

It is now time to stop using the word in the context of general practice education because of the overwhelmingly negative connotations associated with this word.

When I say exposure, I don’t mean general practice teaching.

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