BEGINNER’S MIND

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ‘beginner’s mind’ invites the expert medical professional to be present to their patients, remaining curious and responsive in the face of the individuality of illness. Each patient is a universe of unknowns, presenting with suffering which cannot always be classified with a diagnosis. Improvisation and openness may not just benefit our patients enduring their patient journeys but may also revive and reconnect us with our own humanity.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO ME

My experience as cancer patient brought home to me the value of encountering a doctor who was present and able to listen and respond to me as an individual. It did not necessarily take longer, but was about an attitude of heart.

Like any professional, as GPs we are at risk of presumption and habitual thinking. Beginner’s mind, that is recapturing the openness and curiosity modelled to us by children, can powerfully transform the medical encounter, allowing space for emergence of patient perspective and doctor response.

KEY MESSAGE

Embrace curiosity and learning into our expert clinical practice

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot

I watch my 18 month old daughter, Annika, carefully taking the clothes out of a basket, bringing them to me and then sometimes putting them back. Next, it’s the apples from an abundant harvest that are brought one by one, or moved around the kitchen or placed lovingly inside my boots. She explores the apple’s surfaces poking and prodding the holes and irregularities. ‘Rotten’ she says and brings one to me for consideration. I watch her work, or should I say play, by which I mean improvisatory engagement in her own active creative exploration. She enters into ‘flow’, a state of absorption in her creative pursuit.

A precious silence descends over a group of medical students in one of our creative workshops. They are concentrating hard as they explore ideas and lived experiences through paints, clay, material, feather, buttons etc. This is flow.

The idea of flow has been conceptualised, researched and written about by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [1]. Flow is the zone we enter when in creative process or exploration we lose all sense of time, of self, of outcomes, instead being fully immersed in our activity, responding to materials, textures and processes. In flow process is valued above end product or any extrinsic good resulting from the work.

In her state of flow Annika is attentive to all that emerges from her enquiry with different materials as she seeks to make sense of a world that is unknown to her. She acts like a scientist doing experiments [2], bringing the whole of herself to bear on a situation or encounter, remaining present and alert. She comes with literally a beginner’s mind, a concept drawn from Zen Buddhism around bringing openness and curiosity to our experiences rather than leaning on a multitude of preconceived ideas [3].

A new medical student meeting her first patient on a home visit also brings a beginners perspective, illustrated by her openness and presence [4,5]. Her words can serve as an evocative reminder to us of our first experiences in medicine. In this first stanza of an arts-based reflective assignment, Georgina writes about her encounter with a lady suffering terminal cancer:

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I am a canvas,  
As blank as can be,  
Inexperienced in suffering,  
Ill-health still a mystery to me,  
I sit waiting for your paintbrush,  
For the colours to unveil,  
I sit, I wait.

Georgina Maguire (2010) [6]

Remaining curious and open tie in with an inductive approach to consulting described as starting where the patient is at and with what they want to say, as opposed to the deductive approach, working to confirm or refute hypotheses in the clinical encounter. Fairhurst and May [8] have researched general practice consultations regarding inductive or deductive approaches and they found that an inductive approach allowed the patient to be part of the problem formulation which would then emerge over the length of the consultation. This was deemed good for the patient, as GPs who consulted more inductively had a greater sense of ‘knowing’ their patient. But the doctors working inductively also seemed to benefit, being found to have greater satisfaction in their practice.

The inductive approach to consulting involves improvisation and presence from the doctor as well as engagement with the individuality of the patient’s unique illness narrative. As Atluru, a doctor working in the Emergency Department writes in support of improvisation in medical education, improvisation is more about reacting, than acting [9]. It is about spontaneity and honesty in the clinical encounter [10]. I hold enormous gratitude to my cancer surgeon who recognised the particular suffering of a medic, with medical knowledge and access to the literature, facing all the uncertainties of cancer. He used research, story telling and case studies carefully chosen to resonate with me as a clinician to offer me hope in my darkest hour. He acted upon my concerns, for example, of lymph node swelling after mastectomy and delayed the radiotherapy to do an axillary clearance, acknowledging to me as a clinician to offer me hope in my darkest hour. He acted upon my concerns, for example, of lymph node swelling after mastectomy and delayed the radiotherapy to do an axillary clearance, acknowledging that I would be anxiously examining myself if ever there was any swelling there.

I began with the TS Elliot quote ‘we shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time’ This, to me, encapsulates what is required for true expert clinical practice. As I recently shared with second year medical students, go on your learning journeys, become more confident and competent in medicine and then as a professional go back to what you had at the start of your medical studies. Recall when you first met patients, that quality of attention, the humility of mind and bring this perspective to your encounters whilst holding onto and using your tools and skills of your profession.

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