The essence of medicine

Daniel K Sokol

BMJ 2008;336;1163-
doi:10.1136/bmj.39583.748727.94

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/336/7654/1163

These include:

Rapid responses
You can respond to this article at:
http://bmj.com/cgi/eletter-submit/336/7654/1163

Email alerting service
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article - sign up in the box at the top left of the article

Notes

To order reprints follow the "Request Permissions" link in the navigation box

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/subscribers
The essence of medicine

Writers may tell us their theories on what the essence of medicine is, but it takes actual contact with patients to bring it home to us.

I do not know whether she expected this: a crowd of 10 curious students in this small, overfit room deep in the bowels of the hospital. She seemed so exposed and frightened in her wheelchair, like a hapless musician unwittingly pushed on stage. The neurologist, standing by her side, was hitting a tendon hammer against his palm.

"Please gather around," he ordered, "and get as close as you can to the patient." We encircled her. A student in the front row took a history.

Anastasia Hayes (who wishes to have her name published) was in her 60s, with golden hair and thick glasses that magnified her eyes. Her voice was soft, close to a whisper. She explained how, months ago, her left leg became weak.

At first, I blamed the neurologist for her distress. Why did he ask the dreaded question? He, of all people, had known the grim future that I reread an essay by Richard Selzer, a master of both pen and scalpel, to think objectively on ponderous matters. Detachment is essential to clear thinking.

Earlier that day, on the bus to work, I reread an essay by Richard Selzer, a master of both pen and scalpel, in search of advice for a surgeon friend. The day before my friend had confessed: "I just had to break terrible news to a patient. His tumour was inoperable. But I didn't feel sad at all."

I was unmoved.

Selzer writes that a surgeon’s compassion arises from the “cumulative murmuring of the numberless wounds he has dressed, the incisions he has made, all the sores and ulcers and cavities he has touched in order to heal.” I emailed the extract to my friend, hoping that he might draw some comfort from it, and went about my day.

Drying the last of her tears, Anastasia said, "I hope I'll be strong enough to cope." The neurologist squeezed her hand. He did not say a word. As I watched him comfort the patient, my thoughts returned to Selzer's essay and his concluding words: “Out of the resonance between the sick man and the one who tends him there may spring the incisions he has made, all the sores and ulcers and cavities he has touched in order to heal.”

I eventually found the passage I was looking for: "What did the doctor tell you about the disease?" the neurologist asked, crouching next to her. The room was silent.

"He said I'm going to have trouble moving my arms and legs. That I'll have trouble breathing... and swallowing." Anastasia spoke hesitantly, as if remembering a half learnt poem. Then she paused, and the silence became louder. "It's going to be tough."

Behind her glasses, tears welled up in her eyes. She wiped them away and apologised.

Overwhelmed with sadness, I felt like a voyeur, peering through her glasses into the recesses of her stricken soul. I did not understand why she apologised. What rule did she transgress? The rule of optimism? Of stoicism? Of dry eyed composure?

I went about my day.

As the crowd admired a performance of Babinski’s reflex, I saw Anastasia glance at her watch. It was lonely at her end like the drippings of his birth. It is much later that it comes."

Drying the last of her tears, Anastasia said, "I hope I'll be strong enough to cope." The neurologist squeezed her hand. He did not say a word. As I watched him comfort the patient, my thoughts returned to Selzer’s essay and his concluding words: “Out of the resonance between the sick man and the one who tends him there may spring the reluctance to allow a patient to tell her story, or to share it with us."

In that silent moment of compassion when the neurologist squeezed Anastasia’s hand, even in the presence of 10 medical students, I caught a glimpse of it. It was more subtle even than the patient’s barely visible fascination. The words of Paracelsus, Bernard, and Selzer, which hours earlier sounded fuzzy, rang clear to me.

As I read this, it occurred to me that Paracelsus in the 16th century and the late French haematologist Jean Bamard also claimed that medicine was grounded on love. There must be some truth in this, I told myself, as the bus arrived at my stop, but the idea remained hazy in my mind, a little too poetic.

The presence of 10 medical students, their pendency, their knowledge, their love, and their compassion for a patient who tends him there may spring the reluctance to allow a patient to tell her story, or to share it with us."

Daniel K Sokol is lecturer in medical ethics and law, St George’s, University of London daniel.sokol@talk21.com

Patient consent obtained.