

FILLER

Bedside manner

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Although I am used to medical students sitting in on my clinics, I was surprised recently by how many notes one particular student was taking. I found it hard to believe that the amount of knowledge dripping off my lips should have filled so many A4 sheets of paper.

When I asked what she had found so necessary to record, she replied that she was simply noting the questions that I asked and the answers that I received. She had taken an interest in consultations after a BSc in primary care. We discussed what she had seen, and the fact that her position allowed her to observe lots of different doctors in action, many of whom were seriously lacking in consultation skills.

The power of the consultation is clearly recognised in primary care, but this has yet to permeate the hospital world. While general practitioners in training have their consultations observed and discussed in hospital medicine, neither I nor my colleagues, nor, to our shame, our trainees, have ever received this kind of training.

What does this say about us? That we don't need the patient's input because we can use tests to find the answer? That we don't

want to talk to them in case we dig up extra problems that we won't know how to deal with? That, as specialists, we need only to know about their livers, lungs, kidneys, hearts, or guts without really knowing them? That we don't really care?

The consultation is, for most hospital physicians, the most important medical tool we have. It is our "sword and bow." It is what our patients use to judge us. It is inconceivable that we would let a doctor perform an endoscopy or colposcopy without evidence of training and competence, yet we are thrown into consultations usually without any training or supervision beyond a "discuss the case when you are finished."

Perhaps it is just that analysing our bedside manner seems too personal, and we prefer to live under the illusion that we do it well or that it is just our way of doing things. Either way, we are devaluing an essential medical skill.

As the ancient text says, "I have learnt most from my students."

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