

My Medical Problems

BBC Radio 4 "Forum"

We are living in an increasingly health conscious world.....a convenient opening statement that is, of course, entirely untrue. We, being the whole of mankind, have always been fascinated by our own, and everybody else's health. Ever since man first began to decipher his own grunts, he has been busy chatting away to friends and complete strangers about the state of his health. I truly believe that man invented fire so that he could complain about burnt fingers. Second to the weather, our health is the universal fodder of casual conversation. The discussion of intimate medical history between strangers is an accepted way to relieve bus queue boredom. These conversations may be informal, but they follow a time-honoured and almost ritual course, one that you will have eves-dropped upon in your local supermarket or post-office. The conversation follows a structure such as this:

The Lead: This can be a response to a general comment, or simply develop on it's own, but either way it is essential. It can be a physical sign such as a cough, a limp, or even a wince. If the conversation has already become health oriented, then it may be a recognition of certain symptoms, or any ailment related response to a joke. Whether the hint is subtle or crude, the sufferer advertises his indisposition.

The Enquiry: The trap has been laid, and the bait has been twitched. The enquirer cannot resist, and feels socially obliged to pry. Maybe with an encouraging, "you want to get that seen to", or the classic, "sounds nasty", he both registers his empathy and solicits for a response.

The Admission: With a modicum of false reluctance, the sufferer reveals all....the G.P. visit, the Consultant's opinion, the future prognosis, gory details and a clumsy sprinkling of medical terms, and very occasionally, weather permitting, the unveiling of a scar, bump, lump or bruise....you can't beat hard physical evidence.

There follows a brief interchange of compassion, sincerity and oddly enough, pride and admiration, until finally, the most bizarre stage of the ritual follows.

The Advice: Due to the sudden overwhelming desire to relieve the suffering of this acquaintance, or more likely, the ego-massaging properties of expressing sound medical knowledge, the enquirer metamorphosises into expert, and in many cases physician.

"Cod liver oil twice a day with milk"...the prescription.

"You want to go and see an aroma-therapist...the referral.

"Stress, that's the problem. Learn to relax"...the counsellor.

"Well actually my wife is a professional spiritual healer"...the vulture.

"Rub witch hazel, egg white and brown sauce into your feet"...alternative medicine.

"Take two aspirins and go to bed for 48 hours"...a G.P. masquerading as a member of the public.

Take it or leave it, the sufferer must accept this part of the ritual with customary gratitude. It is a small price to pay, for it is one thing to suffer, but it is far worse to suffer in silence. Some wear their pain proudly like a medal, others let the facts speak quietly for themselves, a few are reluctant, but cannot resist the relief gained from sharing the pain. The listener must acknowledge and empathise, whether he is being bored by the saga of

the sore thumb, or repulsed by the messy details of a bowel operation....indifference is quite simply rude.

So where does our pent-up, hidden medical knowledge come from? It is undoubtedly inherited from our ancestors. The Good Book tells us that the mother of mankind, Eve, was the first to administer a fatal dose. J.C. himself, was far more successful, and healed everyone from blind men to lepers. Hypocrites wrote the first textbook, while at the same time, the Chinese put two and two together, and realised that sticking a needle in your ear stopped your leg hurting. The Medieval Era saw a penchant for potions, skull-boring, and making things bleed. There followed a tendency towards leeches, and hacking at things; and then lashings of hot water and towels, miracle tonics and self-electrocution. In more recent times, the barbers adapted their knowledge of sharp instruments, and became surgeons. Eventually, after much experimentation, these hairdressers wrote some books, which were read by scholars, who became doctors. The doctors are now the guardians of this inheritance, but unfortunately we all descended from Eve (Adam's 12th floating rib), and therefore we all carry a little physician within us.

Our fascination with medicine, and other people's health, has been the T.V. programme controller's saviour. Medical documentaries rate a close second to those dedicated to the eating-habits, savageries, and sex lives of the animal kingdom. We will watch endless hours of soap-operas and serials set in the varied medical environments, and the morning/daytime sofa crew interview a succession of medical experts, resident doctors, the healed and the tragically unhealed. Newspapers appear to employ more health correspondents than foreign correspondents. Light-hearted popular magazines read like medical journals; and gadgets, potions and lotions are peddled to us from every billboard. Our health has become an industry, our employer, a market sector, a stock market gamble, and, of course, a hobby.

Health can mean wealth. The health industry thrives and survives on the inevitable certainty that at some time, we are all ill. Our fragile constitutions provide a guaranteed firm market base, less affected by consumer unpredictability, and relatively recession proof. The huge medical and pharmaceutical conglomerates initiate, fund and ultimately control research into new vaccines, treatments and cures, safe in the knowledge that the end product will be an expensive one, and ideally for them, the first one. They need not fear that all these cures will eventually erode and negate the size of their market, as nature has decided to side with commerce, and is conveniently producing resistant bacterial strains, deadly new viruses, and bumper crops of the tobacco plant. To help things along, the medical giants can rely on their industrial and manufacturing allies to produce plenty of pollutants to add to nature's melting pot of disease and infection.

Just as ill health has many different presentations, so does its related industry. The conglomerates reign supreme, but they are closely followed by the equipment and technology companies, then the private medical and insurance groups, high street pharmacy chains, smooth talking gynaecologists, dentists, the local osteopath, acupuncturists, shamanic healers, and legions of aroma-therapists. Even though some of the so-called "complimentary" medical practitioners can trace their professional roots back through the centuries, their popularity within Western society has increased enormously over the last fifteen years. Despite the long hair and bare feet, the space-age

years of the late '50s and '60s saw an unwavering trust in the power of pharmaceuticals, radiation and the surgeons knife....there would have been no free sex without the birth control pill. However, pharmaceutical scandals, treatment tragedies, litigation, falling standards, and in some cases, common sense, have bred distrust, and the search for alternatives..."Alternative Medicine." It all goes back to our desire to communicate, and seek attention from others when we are ill. We need to "see" somebody, anybody, tell someone, because we cannot help ourselves when we are ill. Ever since you ran to your mother with your first grazed knee, you've realised that somebody else's healing touch is far more effective than your own. Pain, sickness and distrust of so-called "Conventional Medicine" are a recipe for vulnerability, and guarantee that the more dubious alternative clinicians/healers do not have to employ a hard sell when plying their trade. The much publicised failures, and lack of faith in standard medicine, have led to the adoption of a more holistic approach to patient care. Unfortunately, the word holistic is all-encompassing, and can be interpreted as an umbrella that throws its shade upon the darker side of the health industry. The back street healers, the charlatans and the quacks have re-surfaced, with their dodgy diplomas and un-tested theories, rubbing their healing hands together in anticipation of their sometimes desperate clientele. However it would be wildly unfair to tar all alternative therapists with the same sceptical brush. Not all are quacks, many have studied hard, believe sincerely that they have the ability to help, and are truly compassionate people with an enthusiastic belief in their particular techniques. Their self-confidence, their ability to listen and their excellent patient "handling", can lead to an impressive success rate. With many medical conditions, the remedy lies not in what you administer, but in how you administer it. Developing this rapport, and more importantly, trust, seems to pacify symptoms. However, trust can be a dangerous panacea, as it provides a sanctuary in which illness can still prevail. A malignant spinal tumour, cleverly mimicking low-back pain, doesn't respect trust...it has a total disregard for crystal therapy, aroma therapy, reflexology, homeopathy, in fact, most 'erapies and 'ologies....with a lot of luck, and above all, early recognition, it can be tamed by the knife and controlled chemico-nuclear medicine. Conversely, when the simple low-back pain gets brushed off with a few pain-killers and instructions for a weeks "bed-rest", and, of course, when this usually fails, the therapists begin polishing their brass name plaques.

How does the sick man wade his way through the barrage of practitioners, healers and paraphernalia of the health industry? With whom does he place the essential trust? In this country legislation does not protect him from the correspondence course amateurs. The demands placed upon the overworked National Health Service have clouded the efficiency of its well-trained employees trying to swathe their way through a bottomless pit of waiting lists. There may be little legislation, but when the mistakes are made, there is plenty of opportunity for litigation. The seeds of doubt are sown, breeding an intolerance of conventional medicines failures. The average G.P. takes more flak than The Wailing Wall of Calcutta and has a ball and chain called a budget manacled to his writing hand, yet his T.V. contemporaries are portrayed as "real life" docu-heroes, and prime-time drama sex objects. The true face of medicine is frankly too ugly for the general public; we prefer it to be disguised by make-up and studio lighting, and we are far too easily seduced by the fascination of a "revolutionary medical breakthrough". Everyday, a hundred or so appendix removals are performed, safely removing the threat

of fatal peritonitis. Every day a cancer is missed. Do we celebrate the successful? No, we crucify the failed.

The universal symbol of The Medical World, B.M.A. included, is the familiar snake entwined around a staff; the same snake that is draped around the witch doctor's neck; the same snake that tempted Eve to plunder the fruits of Eden; and the same snake that begged Kipling's Mowglai to "trust in me".

Robert Wood
Chartered Physiotherapist