

BMJ 1994;308:923 (2 April)

Caring for Mrs. Brown

Mrs. Brown is admitted to the hospital because of nausea and discomfort in the upper part of the abdomen after eating. She has seen several doctors in the past and has had various medications and diets. Her symptoms suggest organic disease but the tests give normal results. Immediately everybody loses interest. The attending physician says, "Well, there's nothing the matter with her." The clinical clerk feels he has worked for nothing. The intern, eager to clear out the ward, sends her home saying she is lucky not to have anything serious. Mrs. Brown is relieved at first but her symptoms soon return; so she goes to see another doctor or tries chiropractic.

Mrs. Brown has aged well. She is Dr Francis Peabody's hypothetical patient in "The care of the patient" (*JAMA* 1927;88:877) - a classic essay that with its "fabric of pristine humanism, its universality, and its timeliness, embodies the noblest aspirations of the medical profession." (*JAMA* 1984;252:819.)

Dr Peabody discusses in detail the care of the patient in whom no organic illness is found. Here he advocates an intensely personal approach in which the doctor spends much time with the patient, gains his confidence, and takes into account all the social and economic factors operative in his life. The outcome should not be "there is nothing the matter with you" but an explanation of how such symptoms arise and how emotions or other factors can bring them about.

Related to this is the need to treat the patient, not the disease: "The treatment of a disease may be entirely impersonal; the care of a patient must be completely personal." Of further concern is the depersonalization brought about by hospitals: "Hospitals, like other institutions founded with the highest human ideals, are apt to deteriorate into dehumanized machines, and even the physician who has the patient's welfare at heart finds that pressure of work forces him to give most of his attention to the critically sick...." And again: "When a patient enters a hospital, one of the first things that commonly happens to him is that he loses his personal identity. He is generally referred to, not as Henry Jones, but as that case of mitral stenosis in the second bed on the left."

Writing in 1927, Dr Peabody thought that it had become fashionable to say that the modern doctors had become too scientific, but in fact they were decidedly unscientific if they gave up when organic disease was ruled out instead of trying to find the real cause of the symptoms. He thought that young doctors often failed to establish an intimate relationship with their patients and blamed this on their being trained in large hospitals and clinics rather than in doctors' offices and patients' homes: "Now the essence of the practice of medicine is that it is an intensely personal matter, and one of the chief differences between private practice and hospital practice is that the latter always tends to be impersonal." Dr Peabody, who worked at the Boston City Hospital and died at the early age of 47, concluded that "one of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient."