

# From the Editor

## Understanding illness and medical humanities

*Scientific knowledge and acquired clinical skills of the doctor must be complemented by a humane attitude leading instinctively to a humane judgement.*

Douglas Black<sup>1</sup>

Understanding illness is the key to good medical practice. Professor Simon Wessely's review of the Gulf War Syndrome in *Clinical Medicine* gave profound insights into biomedical and psychological causes of illness interpreted in relation to the contemporary sociology of illness<sup>2</sup>. Understanding illness now, in an era when medical practice has become effective, yet potentially dangerous, is more important than ever it was when medicine was safe but ineffective<sup>3</sup>. Yet we still live with uncertainty: choices must often be made in the presence of uncertainty<sup>4</sup>. What can be done is not necessarily what should be done. Good clinical judgement requires a profound understanding of the human condition.

Acquisition of humane clinical judgement comes through two routes – study of the sciences on the one hand, and of the arts and humanities on the other<sup>5</sup>. There is a tension in this, perhaps anomalous at a time when scientific medicine brings so much benefit to mankind. Traditional medical curricula have indeed rightly focussed on the sciences: now there is increasing recognition of the need to introduce the humanities to medical students and this is also acknowledged by the GMC. But there is nothing new here. William Osler thought that 'the modern scientific' man should be saturated with the Bible, Plato, Homer, Shakespeare and Milton<sup>6</sup>, and many other authors have recommended lengthy book lists. John Malins (Birmingham physician and Linacre Fellow at RCP) described the necessity for reading to make 'the sort of doctor whom we should like to consult as patient or colleague'<sup>7</sup>. And Dr Deborah

Kirklin (Lecturer in Medical Humanities at UCL), writing in the last issue of *Clinical Medicine*<sup>8</sup>, observed that we all need to study the humanities 'to enhance our understanding of the experiences of illness.'

Only a few medical schools in the UK have courses in humanities compared to perhaps half of all schools in the USA. The need to study the humanities is not in doubt – though introduction of new courses and modules might once again promote curriculum overload. In response, Sir David Weatherall has suggested that 'a structured course on the humanities is no substitute for a few years spent exposed to people of every kind, sick and well'<sup>5</sup>. It can be no accident that when Galileo matriculated at the University of Pisa in 1581, the schools of medicine and mathematics then were under the umbrella of the Faculty of Arts<sup>9</sup>.

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## References

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