



Sri Lanka Journal of Medicine

The Official Journal of the Kandy Society of Medicine

Volume. 25 No. 2 July–December 2016

Biannually ISSN 1021-2604

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WHAT WE DO NOW WE CAN DO BETTER

As a nation we can be proud of our achievements in health care over the past two decades. We have one of the lowest neonatal mortality rates in the region and malnutrition has shown a downward trend. In comparison, our neighboring countries are struggling to control these health issues. A very significant contribution to these statistics has been made by the free education and free health care afforded to the people of Sri Lanka. As a profession we have undoubtedly contributed much towards these achievements. However, we should not be content and complacent, but should strive to achieve excellence in areas not considered important and relevant until now.

The pertinent question that I pose to you is whether we as doctors provide 'Quality' humane care at all times to the individuals who seek our help. There is no doubt that the number of patients may have increased as a result of the paradigm shift in the disease spectrum over the last decade, thus making our work more tedious. On the contrary statistics show we have reasonable numbers in our profession to provide adequate care. We should seriously question then, whether the remote under privileged areas of our country is adequately served by us. Most of us see and manage 'cases' rather than patients with feelings. We tend to extend more compassion, patient centeredness and empathy when dealing with a patient with 'connections', be it professional political or otherwise. Holistic care, taking into consideration each patient as a unique individual should be the norm rather than the exception, and will definitely lead to better health outcomes.

Incorporating and sustaining soft skills into our routine clinical practice will certainly provide 'humane' care for the patients we see. It will enable us to understand their perspective about the illness, show them due respect and empathy and plan out their management in a more meaningful and flexible way which will lead to better patient satisfaction. It is encouraging to note that modern undergraduate and post graduate medical curricula emphasize the importance of these skills and have incorporated them into their teaching /learning programmes.

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Published by

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For these interventions to be effective however, assessment of these skills becomes necessary as it is well known that assessment drives learning. Medical students, and junior doctors learn the art of medicine by their observations during day to day clinical work, and very often try to emulate the skills, attitudes and behaviors that they see. Hence it becomes essential for all of us in the profession to make an effort to change our style of practice. This should not be a big challenge as we are part of nation that is known for its friendly nature and hospitality and practice religions that highlight the need for kindness thoughtfulness and compassionate care.

Let us unite to take clinical care beyond what it is today. It will make our clientele feel content and satisfied. It will also create a better atmosphere for us to deliver our services thus gaining the respect and admiration of the society, and perhaps avoid the close scrutiny and criticisms we are exposed to.

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Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/sljm.v25i2.18>