



## **‘Why do my patients leave me?’**

I have frequently quoted from a paper entitled ‘Why do my patients leave me?’, a copy of which I read some years ago. Its origin was lost until a recommendation by a colleague that the *SAMJ* re-publish it revived its memory. It was the presidential address by Dr C P Theron to the NE Division of the OFS Branch, published in the *Journal of the Medical Association of South Africa* (BMA) on November 1930 and reprinted, at the special request of numerous members, in the *SA Tydskrif vir Geneeskunde* in August 1950 (reflecting some of the titles that the *SAMJ* has rejoiced in during its 120-year history). What were his wisdoms on this often-painful dilemma in the lives of medical practitioners?

Dr Theron addressed his young brethren, saying that when they grew older they too would puzzle why patients left them for some inexplicable reason. Examining the various reasons and considering the inevitability of the course of events may make us more content and more sociable members of both our profession and the community at large.

He first considered colleagues — ‘the other man as a cause’. The ‘backbiter’ is hostile and mean and stoops at nothing to prove the ignorance of all and sundry. When called in for a consultation he displays a superior air and in principle differs in his diagnosis. The more subtle sneak agrees with everything that has been done but subsequently tells the patient and his friends that he did not want to hurt his colleague’s feelings but felt that it was his duty to tell them that the treatment was not exactly on the right lines. Then there is the man who in a roundabout way lets it be known to the patient that with his treatment the case would have turned out otherwise. The frank charlatan has gadgets and awe-inspiring instruments and methods of diagnosis and treatment that patients fall for and derive psychological benefits not achieved by more ordinary methods. The man with the legitimate pull over him has devoted time and money to extra study in some or other special subject. Then there is the younger man with the latest methods, newest knowledge and enthusiasm and optimism born from inexperience, which influence the lay mind.

Secondly, the patient’s friends influence them to leave him. Patients of other doctors who have benefited from their treatment recommend their own doctor to their friends. Next are the touts, who are out to acquire patients for the other man by hook or by crook. Or there is the expatient who has his knife in for the doctor because he has been sued for an unpaid account, or is smarting under some actual or imaginary grievance.

Sometimes there are circumstances over which the doctor has no control. During his absence or through a misdirected messenger, another medical practitioner is called, and

remains in attendance. The same thing happens during illness, his own or his family’s. Misfortunes and bad luck, with treatments going wrong and every imaginable unforeseen complication and better luck with colleagues, result in further patients leaving.

He then vents his spleen on the patients. Some patients die, others leave the country and of course they are gone. He gets tired of the chronics, and in the end they get sick and tired of his remedies and the sight of him. Who can blame the incurables if they leave him to clutch at any straw in the vain hope of relief or cure? He refuses to pander to the whims or to believe the stories of the innumerable ills of the hypochondriac, who leaves because of this lack of interest. There is a great host of dissatisfied patients; because he did not visit them often enough, because he visited them too often just to make money out of them, because his charges were too high, and strangely, even because his charges were too low. The patient who owes him money leaves because he cannot pay, is ashamed of his debt or afraid that he may be refused attendance, or simply does not intend to pay.

Most remembered and quoted by those who have read the article is ‘the patient who owes not money, but a debt of gratitude generally for having saved his life or some such trifle’. Theron questions the curious and inexplicable phenomenon ‘that so often a patient who owes you his life, his everything, leaves you, and not only leaves you, but actually goes and slanders you into the bargain’. He could not understand this hurtful occurrence until he came to look at the psychological aspect of the matter and noted that human nature is such that it hates being under an obligation to anybody. One feels instinctively inferior to the person one has not paid in full and cannot approach on an equal footing.

Following some morbid introspection to see what there is in him to make his patients leave him — staleness, being less cocksure than he was in his younger days, carelessness, and so on — Theron concludes with an even more puzzling problem; how it is that he has any patients left at all, to which he says with all sincerity, ‘God knows. I don’t.’

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