

Rodger Charlton

Humanities as an aid to lateral thinking in medicine

Workshop at the European Wonca conference 2009 in Basel (16–19 September 2009) with Charlton R., Prince R., Xavier M.



The workshop exceeded our wildest expectations with a huge attendance and people needing to stand in a large auditorium. We had expected an audience of 10 delegates or less. After all, we were presenting on an area of clinical practice and a concept that many of our colleagues shun. And yet we were doing nothing new, although it is true that we tried to avoid any more than minimal use of PowerPoint, which for many of us is a release from this singular method of modern age medical education. This allowed the words of poetry to speak and the sound of music to inspire those in the room. The impact of the projection of Luke Fildes's painting, "The Doctor", ensured people forgot that the medium was PowerPoint, with more the feel of an old-fashioned projector slide being exhibited. We did not know there would be a roving microphone, let alone believe we would need one. This simple yet invaluable aid allowed us all the privilege to hear experienced family physicians sharing their wisdom with colleagues.



"The Doctor", painted by Luke Fildes in 1891.

Such was the material presented that delegates contributed with enthusiasm as to how the emotion generated by the music, poetry and art related to their patients and their experiences, and for them translated difficulties into meaning. How fortunate we were for contributions from colleagues all over the globe and not least those whose first language was not English. Similarly we were honoured to have the presence of a well-known writer and previous president of the RCGP, and the honorary secretary of the RCGP to attend our workshop. Perhaps this spoke to us how inadequate the biomedical approach alone can be to holistic family physicians whose patients (and us) are searching for answers, meaning and understanding. The recent death of the GP writer and professor of anthropology, Cecil Helman, reminded us of how important lateral thinking is in making the distinction between disease and illness. He was one of the first to write on the subject and devoted his life to what the patient narrative can reveal about their inner world and illness.

Attending a WONCA conference, especially being lucky enough to have space to share one's ideas, can be an inspirational experience. We feel sure that most of the delegates returned to clinical practice feeling refreshed, with countless new ideas and thoughts. In particular, on how to help their patients and themselves understand how family physicians can work better through the often difficult and treacherous journeys through life's challenges together.

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