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CARE AND COMPASSION

Public perception of care and compassion in health care has recently taken a beating, following the media exposé of the seemingly unfeeling treatment of a woman in the throes of a threatened abortion in the emergency department of a major metropolitan hospital. The story of a woman allegedly being abandoned in a hospital toilet, in pain and panic, does not paint a picture of care and compassion.

The ensuing public outcry precipitated at least two high-level inquiries. Importantly, the recommendations and protocols that followed insisted that practitioners be ever sensitive to the dignity and integrity of patients, while seeking to improve their journey through the health care system. However, protocols alone cannot always guarantee care and compassion.

As noted in a recent *Lancet* editorial: "Care is not a 'thing' — a product provided by clinicians and received by patients."* In a similar vein, Francis Peabody, a prominent Bostonian physician, poignantly captured the essence of care in a lecture delivered to Harvard students in 1925: "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."[†]

The *Lancet* editorial also suggests the acronym CARE — Compassion, Attention, Respect and Empathy — as a framework for exploring care and compassion in medical training.

Ironically, all these essential human qualities had already been distilled in the seminal moral command, the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Treat others as you would want to be treated if you were in their place." Universal adoption of this rule would certainly be an antidote to much of the dehumanisation fostered by modern medicine's emphasis on protocols, outcome measures, efficiency and effectiveness — hardly an environment conducive to care and compassion!



Martin B Van Der Weijden

* Can caring for patients be taught [editorial]? *Lancet* 2007; 370: 630.

[†] Peabody FW. Care of the patient. *JAMA* 1927; 88: 877-882.

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MJA Rapid Online Publication: denotes an article fast tracked for online publication.

January MJA BookClub Winners

Congratulations to: Dr Colin Ong, Ryde, NSW; Dr Abul Salim, Coonabarrabran, NSW; Dr Roy Nicholls, Toowoomba, Qld; Dr Eugene Tan, Singapore; and Dr Jane Dymond, Nedlands, WA, who each win a set of 2 MJA Practice Essentials Monographs (Dermatology and Allergy). If you would like to purchase these Monographs from the MJA Practice Essentials Series, visit the eMJA BookShop <<http://shop.mja.com.au>>. Thanks to everyone who purchased books from the January MJA BookClub and went into the draw. Peter Humphries, AMPCo's Production Coordinator, drew the January winners. To see this month's MJA BookClub's great offers, see page 297 and the inside back cover of this issue.

