

BOOK REVIEW

GPs are listening

Listening as work in primary care. Simon Cocksedge. Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing, 2005 (ix + 175 pp, \$51.55). ISBN 1 85775 636 3.

NOWADAYS EVERYBODY CLAIMS to be a good listener. Politicians tell us that they listen to the electorate, retailers to the consumer, and professional associations to their membership. But when it comes to having ears wide open, few can rival general practitioners. For us, listening is a huge part of our everyday practice.

Simon Cocksedge, a GP in rural England and lecturer in primary care and communication at the University of Manchester, believes that the ever increasing use of quantitative performance indicators to assess family doctors' work may lead to the under-valuing of listening by both doctors and their NHS masters. His book *Listening as work in primary care*, based on in-depth interviews with 23 experienced GPs in a semi-rural area of England, attempts to present the reality of "listening work" in general practice and to discuss its theoretical underpinnings.

There are, of course, different types of listening. Cocksedge is not so concerned with purely clinical listening in order to make a diagnosis. Nor is he writing about listening in the overtly psycho-therapeutic context. This is mostly about the less directed kind of listening, where patients may be relating significant personal narratives as part of an ordinary consultation, rather than explicit participation in a talking therapy.



He names pastoral work (being available for reliable supportive care in areas such as family issues or bereavement) and holding work (maintaining a constant doctor-patient relationship that is concerned not with cure but support) as areas where this type of listening is paramount. His interviews reveal that while the majority of GPs regard this as legitimate work, many doubt their competence and feel a tension between it and the more biomedical aspects of their practice. This usually comes down to time pressures, not surprising given most GP appointments in the United Kingdom are scheduled just eight minutes apart!

The value of this aspect of GP work is easy to underestimate and hard to quantify. Standing in the tradition of Balint, Cocksedge uses these interviews to argue for both the importance of the doctor-patient relationship and the value of subjective experience in general practice. In my case at least, he is preaching to the converted, although his digressions into theory suffer at times from a conflict between some essentially common-sense ideas and the unnecessarily pompous language used to describe them.

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