

BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER

During a recent meeting at a major hospital, I visited the staff cafeteria, and was reminded of comments made some time ago by an eminent hospital doctor that "these cafeterias are meant to make us all one happy family".

But a happy place it certainly was not! There were few doctors, and hospital staff were scattered in small cliques. Conversation was muted, laughter was absent, and a sense of depressive detachment pervaded the place.

Now, backtrack to the 1960s and 1970s when most hospitals had doctors' dining rooms. Physicians and surgeons, visiting and full-time doctors, junior and senior resident staff all regularly "broke bread" at the same table. Conversations were animated and turned mostly on current clinical experiences and everyday management. Doctors learned from each other, sharing expertise and motivation. But, more importantly, the "breaking of bread" in the spirit of collegiality nurtured a sense of belonging.

The doctors' Common Room was another place for professional and social interaction. Doctors retired there after ward rounds, seeing outpatients or labouring in theatres. Consultations and other business was arranged, and doctors learned from sometimes heated debate and uninhibited questioning over tea or coffee and sandwiches. Tips for sitting the examinations of the Royal Colleges were passed on to younger aspirants, while battles were waged on the billiard table — the room forged the hospital's *esprit de corps*.

But no longer. The industrialisation of medicine and the egalitarianism of the workplace has destroyed all this. Now doctors are broken into small groups, meet perchance in the carpark, and rarely break bread together. *Esprit de corps* is practically extinct.

Is it not the time to reverse these eventualities? A "Return of the doctors' Common (and Dining) Room" campaign, perhaps?


Martin B Van Der Weyden

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Cover image: Patient undergoing therapeutic hypothermia after out-of-hospital cardiac arrest.
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