

## Letter to the Editor

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### The absence of holism in medicine—the experience of a psychiatrist as medical/surgical patient

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Dr Jörg Strobel  
Clinical Director  
Country Health SA LHN, Mental Health Directorate  
22 King William Street  
Adelaide, SA 5000, Australia

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Dear Editor,

The presenting facts are simple:

Feeling unwell with flu-type symptoms and a pernicious cough I took a day off work. Getting out of bed in the afternoon, feverish and a bit dehydrated, I fainted and fell to the ground. When I regained consciousness a little later I was in a pool of blood attributable to several facial lacerations and a broken nose.

My wife, who luckily was at home at the time, assisted with first aid, called the ambulance, and from there on I was in the hands of skilled professionals who did their jobs well. During my short admission in hospital I received service from an emergency department (ED) physician, a radiologist, an infectious diseases specialist, an ENT surgeon, a general physician, a cardiologist, many nurses and auxiliary staff, all of them professional, friendly and to the point.

The missing piece was in history taking and any reflection on the broader psychosocial context of my admission.

Illnesses, including accidents, are contextual. Normally, I am healthy and rather resilient, and my formulation in my case, is that my immune system has been weakened due to a range of demands and life stressors, which made me vulnerable to the viruses that are currently in circulation.

I love my job with its various dimensions of clinical work, administration/governance, research, etc., however, due to the development of new services in our organisation it has

been a demanding and challenging year. I have been travelling a lot, for work and personally; most recently on short notice to Germany to visit my ageing mother who is of failing health, where I picked up the virus.

Personality traits play their role as well. I am curious and inquiring by nature and involve myself in a range of activities outside my regular work that are also demanding of time and energy. My wife holds the view that I overdo work and do not give our family the time it deserves.

Recently, I was musing with a colleague about our differences. He, with his Catholic background, is metaphorically drawn to use his breaks to walk to the local piazza to enjoy the sunshine and a café latte, whereas with my German Protestant work ethic (metaphorically again) I am more likely to use a break to keep working, to munch a homemade sandwich behind the computer while answering emails.

The point I want to raise is the need for deeper exploration and reflection about the various drives, drivers, and influences in life that conspire to the manifestation of illness or accident. In my case, that no deep history was taken is not really an issue; it is my practice to reflect on priorities and commitments in my life, as I want to live a multifaceted and sustainable life in service of the people and issues I care about. However, if that had not been the case, a probing question from one of the medical staff I encountered during my recent hospitalisation may have led to a deeper inquiry into the “why” of my incident.

For medicine to live up to the aspiration of being a healing profession, it has to enter into deeper conversations with patients beyond the symptom level and ask questions of existential relevance that see a person in context of his/her life's history and trajectory.

Having said this, I am still deeply grateful for the excellent care I received.

Sincerely,

Dr Jörg Strobel  
Clinical Director, CHSA MHD