

A reminder of mortality

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On both shoulders I carry a reminder of my mortality - the scars of a petechial rash sustained in December 1975.

It was the day after I had graduated but my celebrations the night before had been muted. I was simply glad to have put six hard years behind me and be able to enjoy my recent marriage and the freedom from study and exams.

I woke with a headache and a vague irritability, which seemed to develop into one of my occasional migraines. I could deal with this - I'd had migraines before and besides I was a doctor now.

However, the headache and vomiting worsened. This was a particularly severe migraine. I still resisted further help. I got worse.

By the time I finally relented and agreed to go to hospital I was past caring about anything. The pain and vomiting was all I knew apart from wife's comforting touch. We lived five minutes from the hospital where I had trained and where I was due to start work the following week. Hardly the start to my medical career that I had envisaged!

Despite the short distance and my wife's extra careful driving, the trip was agony. Our arrival at the hospital is just a vague memory. A blur of pain, nausea, vomiting, hyperacusis and an incredible sensitivity to smells. I could not think. I was beyond caring for anything except stopping the pain.

A lumbar puncture was performed by a friend a year ahead of me. The pressure was relieved and for a short while

the pain stopped and I was lucid before succumbing to the illness again.

'I am afraid that almost certainly means meningitis, especially as it looks like cloudy CSF'.

With every horrendous complication of meningitis fresh in my mind courtesy of final year exams, I knew I was in trouble. There were neutrophils and bacteria in the CSF. Ampicillin was prescribed.

Did I want chloramphenicol as well with its chance of agranulocytosis? With a twenty-something's sense of immortality I declared that I would die clean if I must die. I did not want a life of constant blood transfusions that would eventually fail.

I got worse before I got better, drifting in and out of consciousness. I was told I was very close to death and in my own mind this was confirmed by the memory of an out of body experience. I vividly recall watching, from some vantage point above the bed, medical staff treating me.

The next few days consisted of pain, vomiting, the resiting of drips as veins sclerosed from the high dose ampicillin, and the image of my wife sitting by my bed. Gradually and gratefully I improved and so began a long period of convalescence.

Aside from the physical scars, the episode left me with a greater awareness of the fragility of life and the value of the present. Time can be spent well or wasted but never stored for later use.

It also highlighted the old adage that

the doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient. If my wife had not insisted that my migraine diagnosis was flawed this cautionary tale might indeed have been my obituary.

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