

What gets under your skin?



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Every time I see a patient with an itchy rash, particularly scabies, I spend the rest of the day feeling itchy, trying to resist the temptation to scratch. Much as I would sometimes like to be impervious to the impact of patients on my wellbeing, they have always got under my skin.

I recall standing around the bed of a patient, as a fourth year medical student, with seven other earnest medical students in that particularly unpleasant form of torture known as the 'ward round'. I was asked to examine the patient's hand. He had Dupuytren contracture and I was expected to give my examination findings in a clear, concise and competent manner. As I touched his hand, I was immobilised by sudden and unexpected emotional distress. All of a sudden this was not an anonymous hand. I had held a hand like this all my life. My father had had Dupuytren contracture. He had died 3 months earlier. I turned and walked out of the ward in tears.

Unfortunately this set me up for a difficult year...my peers thought me a bit flakey, and my teachers questioned whether I was really made of the 'right stuff' for a career in medicine. Fifteen years later I was caring for a 45 year old man with melanoma. I visited him at home on a dismal rainy day in winter, and arranged for his admission to hospital. He was very unwell, in pain, and his disease was progressing at an alarming pace. As I walked to my car with his wife and teenage daughter, they asked me how long he would live. I knew it wouldn't be long, and I told them that

this was the time to say the things they would regret not saying. The tears in my eyes were as much for the teenage daughter I had been, and the things I had not said, as for this man and his family.

I'm writing this editorial in the first person, because I think too often, we speak of the impact of professional life on doctors in the third person, as though it happens to someone else and not us. 'Doctors are at increased risk of depression and substance abuse', we say, as though referring to someone else. But, it is you and me we are talking about. Our work gives us a unique insight into life. It is a great privilege and can be an emotionally enriching experience. However, there will be times in our lives (like my fourth year medicine experience) when we are vulnerable, and even a seemingly trivial incident will get under our skin. Like it or not, a medical degree does not confer on us a Teflon coating. Like it or not, there will be an emotional toll from our work.

It seems to me that the important thing to do is not – as perhaps was advocated in previous generations – distance ourselves in a professional persona, to steadfastly refuse emotional involvement, but to accept that we are normal people with normal reactions to difficult situations.

We don't have a good tradition of peer support in our profession, but it is changing. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioner's Victorian Faculty 'GP learning and living' conference held recently in Daylesford, exemplified this. No Teflon

coated doctors to be seen. Just real people, most of whom worked as GPs, trying to balance their personal and professional lives and work out ways to have healthy lives, healthy patients and a healthy profession.

Three things struck me as signs of a changing culture. One was the presentation by a representative of General Practice Registrars Australia, which indicated to me that the emerging generation of GPs understand that attention to self, partner and family are important in developing a successful and sustainable professional life. Another was the revelation that representatives of GP organisations that sometimes appear to have discordant voices (AMA, RDAA, ACRRM, GPRA, RWAV, GPDV and RACGP), have formed a panel to work together on issues impacting upon GPs in Victoria. The third positive was the frank discussion on GPs' wellbeing and the Victorian Faculty initiative to establish a network of peer support groups.

I hope you find this itchy issue of *Australian Family Physician* helpful in your professional practice. I also hope that you will take the time to think about what gets under your skin, and find a healthy way to manage it.

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