The future for personal doctoring

A continuing patient–doctor relationship has achieved the status of a core value and feature of primary care. In this issue of the BJGP, two papers by Salisbury et al and Ridd et al add to the large body of primary care research seeking to improve the definition and measurement of the continuing patient–doctor relationship. The aim is to understand and defend it as a core feature. It has been under pressure as primary health care moves away from autonomous single-handed practices to multidisciplinary group practices with common accountability to central authority.

For primary care and family medicine the continuing patient–doctor relationship has been subsumed under the broader concept of continuity of care. Clinicians from other health disciplines recognise the importance of the relationship with the patient but use the term ‘continuity of care’ to refer to the delivery of services in a coordinated and timely manner by more than one health professional. Salisbury and colleagues call this coordinated care, as would most primary care clinicians. Both Salisbury et al and Ridd et al use the label ‘longitudinal continuity’ to describe the primary care model of continuity of care, a tribute to Barbara Starfield who proposed this term to distinguish it from that of continuity of care used in other disciplines.

Ridd et al synthesise what qualitative research tells us about the nature of the patient–doctor relationship, where the regularity of good experiences with the doctor over time leads to increasing depths of knowledge, trust, loyalty and regard. An article that appeared in this journal in November confirms that these qualities do indeed require time and good rapport. With good measures of such constructs we may be able to quantify the contribution that patient–doctor relationships make to quality of care and good health outcomes. Robust measures have been developed for the dimension of knowledge and trust and these have been linked to outcome such as increased satisfaction and for trust, the vast majority of patients obtain care from their provider of choice when it is important to them. Salisbury and colleagues confirm previous findings showing that patients who always consult the same doctor. Salisbury and colleagues.

What implications can be drawn from these articles about how services are organised? The Salisbury et al article provides a measure of reassurance that, regardless of access-focused innovations, the vast majority of patients obtain care from their provider of choice when it is important to them. Salisbury et al point out that the patient’s capacity to exercise this choice ensures a high quality of patient–doctor relationship as opposed to one that is merely endured. In the face of pressure to ensure prompt access, it is important to retain sufficient organisational flexibility so that patients can choose between promptness of care and seeing a preferred provider according to their specific needs at the time. Savvy patients find ways to ensure this choice, but some — such as those from lower educational achievement or recent
immigrants — are less able to advocate for their preferences and will be more dependent on the way that the services are organised. Again, this is a whole team effort. Ridd et al refer to reception staff contributing to good patient–doctor encounters. More than simply assuring a ‘positive frame of mind’ for the clinical encounter, the reception staff can function as an extension of the relationship with the doctor. This requires that the reception staff are conceived as part of the care team and internalise the practice philosophy as much as the clinicians do. Despite the large body of evidence supporting the importance of concentrating care in known and trusted providers, the continuing patient–doctor relationship still needs to be defended both within primary care and the wider health system. It requires personal and professional commitment by doctors to patients and to the rest of the care team, but it can easily be eroded in a context of constant system change. Research that brings together the qualitative dimensions of the relationship with quantitative measures of healthcare patterns may provide insight whether there is a critical zone of concentration of care at which the therapeutic benefits of continuity are compromised.

Jeanie Haggerty, Associate Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences and Family Medicine, University of Sherbrooke, Longueuil, Québec, Canada.

REFERENCES

Tired all the time: can new research on fatigue help clinicians?

Over 10% of patients attending primary care clinics describe at least one month of substantial fatigue.1 Despite its prevalence, many clinicians feel uncertain or dissatisfied with the level of care they are able to provide patients with persistent fatigue.2 These anxieties are not without basis; up to two-thirds of patients with chronic fatigue report being dissatisfied with the quality of care they receive.3 GPs will tend to stereotype patients with chronic fatigue as having certain undesirable traits and will feel a sense of hopelessness regarding treatment options.4 However, there is now an emerging body of research evidence which should provide GPs with a greater sense of certainty regarding their management decisions. Incorporating this evidence base into clinical practice should allow clinicians to feel less helpless, and will hopefully result in improved outcomes for patients suffering from the debilitating effects of fatigue.

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