



"... what I encountered was a series of extremely supportive health professionals who made clinical decisions based on years of experience (not protocols or targets) [and] the patient in front of them (not the ones lost in the guidelines) ..."

In praise of the vanishing skill of watchful waiting

We are a long-living healthy family who avoid doctors and believe in sleep, fresh air, and good food as the cure to all ills. Yet, for about a year recently, my life became a series of medical crises.

We found my 99-year-old Gran, who lived with us, on the toilet floor lying in her own poo and unable to speak. I developed a series of suspicious symptoms including an itchy mole, numb feet, and a breast lump after my friend's sudden death from cancer plunged me into a state of health anxiety. And my son was referred for delayed puberty at the age of 15. So, for a while I seemed to be constantly on the phone to practice receptionists, visiting the GP, and at the hospital.

And what I encountered was a series of extremely supportive health professionals who made clinical decisions based on years of experience (not protocols or targets), the patient in front of them (not the ones lost in the guidelines), a belief in time (not drugs), and the recognition that symptoms are often a product of state of mind rather than just taking them at face value.

So we put my Gran to bed rather than dragging her off to A&E and she emerged 4 hours later wanting a cuppa. My symptoms disappeared as I came to terms with my own mortality and my son has just hit 6 foot all on his own. And thanks to the experience of the doctors we encountered, we avoided miserable trolleys and long waiting times, unnecessary interventions, and unpleasant or dangerous side effects of drugs.

Medicine has long been described as both an art and a science. Central to this was focusing on the patient, the role of watchful waiting, and letting nature takes its course, along with a healthy scepticism of medical interventions and drugs.

Yet, in the contemporary world of defensive medicine, law suits, powerful drug companies, and 'internetitis', the pressure is on to get patients into the healthcare system earlier and earlier, to refer to the hospital, to actively treat and manage, and always to do more rather than less. In this modern world our doctors could have been

criticised for doing nothing, for neglect, or even for malpractice.

But I am just grateful that they were brave enough to manage me and my family as they felt was right, rather than to bow to the pressure of others who had never even met us.

Jane Ogden,

Mother, granddaughter, patient, Professor in Health Psychology, University of Surrey, Surrey.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp16X688261

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Jane Ogden

Department of Psychology (02AD27), University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7XH, UK.

E-mail: J.Ogden@surrey.ac.uk