

WHAT IS A PATIENT ?

WHAT does the word 'patient' now mean? Its meaning has changed in the past and seems to be changing again. Historically it meant 'sufferer' which was a direct derivation from the Latin *pati*.

Later the word patient was used increasingly to embrace the idea of illness and from this was extended to involve treatment. Patients were people who had symptoms—often pain—and who received treatment for this from doctors. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1970) still gives one definition: "patient—one who is under medical treatment". This use is still common and in hospital practice still true.

Today, however, in general practice even this extended meaning is becoming out of date. What if a doctor sees a baby for a routine developmental assessment? What is the 'treatment' if a doctor calls a patient for surveillance because he is 'at risk' for some condition? These patients are certainly not suffering, are not usually ill, often have no symptoms, and may not have any treatment prescribed.

Thus the introduction of doctor-initiated consultations for symptom-free people has made the old definition of the word patient inappropriate.

Perhaps a new definition is now needed. Could the doctor-patient relationship be the key? Is it true that in general practice today a patient is not necessarily someone who suffers, nor someone who is ill, nor even someone seeking or receiving treatment? Does the word patient now simply mean: "someone in relation to a doctor" or "a person on a doctor's list"?