

Why not discard the desk?

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MY attention was drawn to the significance of the surgery desk as a result of reading two articles on the subject. The first (Ward and Stein, 1975) discussed the importance of reducing the emotional distance between the doctor and patient and the second (Verby *et al.*, 1979) stressed the importance of the relative positions of the doctor, patient, and desk during a consultation. Verby and colleagues also pointed out that the desk was often used by the doctor as a barrier between the patient and the doctor.

Open consultations

After some thought, I decided to try to conduct 'open' consultations (i.e. with no barrier between patient and doctor, and with patient and doctor facing each other) by sitting sideways onto my desk. However, this position seemed so unnatural that I kept tucking my knees back under the desk again.

At this point I began to question whether I needed a desk at all, since it was required only for storage and to provide a writing surface as suggested by Norell (1973). I realized that if I rearranged my consulting room as shown in the photograph (Figure 1), I could dispense with my desk altogether.

With some trepidation I began to use my new consulting room. Six weeks later (having decided that I could 'cope' with my new set-up!) I decided to find out what my patients felt about it.

Patients' preferences

The next 100 consecutive patients I saw who had seen me in both consulting rooms at some time were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Forty-six per cent said they had no preference one way or the other, 13 per cent preferred the old arrangement, and 41 per cent preferred the new arrangement.

Having discovered that, of the 54 per cent of patients who expressed a preference, 75.9 per cent favoured the



Figure 1. The author demonstrating the new seating arrangement in his consulting room.

new seating arrangement, I am hopeful of being able to reduce the emotional distance between my patients and myself as a direct result of reducing the physical barriers between us.

References

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