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Winterwonderland?

The weather forecasters are promising the Return of the Big Snow, but there's not a snowflake in sight as I arrive for a night in the out-of-hours centre. We had a few problems during the earlier blast of snow and ice, so when heavy snow was forecast again we tried to be more prepared with contingency plans for patients not being able to get to the OOH centre, making sure we had plenty of medication in stock and having suitable transport for getting to out-of-the-way destinations. But so far it is an ordinary night, cloudy and mild.

'Mind you, it's a full moon', says the receptionist ominously. Of course I realise it is completely irrational to believe that the moon will influence the health-seeking behaviour of the sleeping masses but I play along with the banter. As it happens, bantering time is short as the night soon gets busy and chaotic. We realise that actually we should have been making plans to keep people away. When the weak morning sun finally arrives to try and chase away that malevolent moon the score on the videoprinter reads: — Superstition 1 – Smug Rational Doctor 0.

In the meantime it's been a parade of the ill, the worried, and the desperate with a whole variety of complaints. Most of the time it's clear who are really ill and who need reassurance. The ones I wonder about are the ones who leave me with a little niggle; the child with a temperature who might deteriorate quickly, the lady upset after a row who might actually be suicidal. Occasionally the niggle prompts me to refer to a hospital colleague. This often results in me being the unwitting contestant in a round of medical Mastermind. I can't even answer the first one about what my specialist subject is, but still the questions fly at me:

'What's their sats?'
'What's the CURB score?'
'What's the suicide risk score?'
'What's the Wells score?'
'What's their favourite colour?'

They seem to have a great faith in these numbers and scores being able to

predict who is really unwell and there seems to be a new one I haven't heard of every time I speak to a colleague. There is a superficial comfort in the apparent certainty of a number, a score or a vital reading but they can be misleading. Years of dealing with patients turning up in all stages of illness have shown me that people can be ill despite objective assessments being normal. Sometimes you have to listen to your instinct.

Often these patients will turn out to be okay despite my wondering, and I'm sure that the hospital doctors will be as underwhelmed by my predictions of potential serious conditions as I am with the weather forecasters tonight. But there have been times when I've been relieved that I listened to a whispering voice. A voice that I initially wanted to dismiss as irrational. Sometimes the moon seems to get it right.

In his book *'How We Decide'*,¹ Jonah Lehrer looks at people making instinctive, instant decisions, often in dangerous circumstances. He tells of an American soldier during the Gulf War feeling fearful about one particular blip on his radar screen. Objectively it was no different to the other numerous blips from friendly aircraft he saw during his watch, but he listened to his feelings and intercepted an Iraqi missile. When some of these instinctive decisions are analysed in hindsight it often turns out that there are subtle differences which are only noticed subconsciously at the time. The more digital and data rich the world becomes, the more instinct, gut feeling, and hunches based on experience are devalued. Yet, there are times when they are crucial and much more informative than cold logical analysis.

Then, as I leave work I think I can see some faint flecks in the air. Maybe it's just my imagination and tiredness but I wonder if my children will get their anticipated day off school after all.

REFERENCE

1. Lehrer, J. *How we decide*. New York: Mariner Books, 2010.

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