I have to confess that it is not often that reading anything in the BJGP changes my practice or even arouses more than a ficker of curious interest. However James Willis’s review of The Master and His Emissary by Ian McGilchrist inspired me to read the book, which has in its turn set me thinking about much that I encounter both as an individual and as a GP in a new light.

McGilchrist’s thesis is that our brain has two complimentary halves which approach the world in different ways. The right cerebral hemisphere is more concerned with connection and the bigger picture, while the left hemisphere is concerned with the technical, the detailed and the straight line. These two functions need to go on separately, but also need to be integrated and there is no sense in which one is better than the other. However the left hemisphere is unable to appreciate anything new unless it has been presented to it by the right. Information processed by the logical left hemisphere is not available to the patient unless it is presented to the patient by the right.

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According to McGilchrist’s thesis we are often locked into a left hemisphere view that denies the possibility of there being another perspective. Consequently we in the NHS go on creating more and more cumbersome logarithms and pathways to deal with imagined clinical situations, all based on single diseases or problems, while the reality is that our patients are complex individuals, and are part of a complex and interconnected social web. As practising clinicians we know that these models can only take us so far, and then we need to offer our patients care and help that relates to the individual facets of their lives, based on experience and humanity with a good dose of common sense.

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