

## The Review

# The poetry of general practice

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# Poems

Only to a GP working in the NHS does Kafka make perfect sense. Last week I received a convoluted e-mail from the local clinical commissioning group (CCG) inviting me to a 'Medicology' workshop. Medicology? I read on, anxious to enlighten myself, but quickly drowned in a sea of meaningless management-speak. That night I dreamt there was a war between the 'pathfinders' and the 'champions'. They wiped each other out. We started again. It was lovely.

A few days later, on 10 November 2012, and I was in Christ Church College, Oxford with 20 fellow battle-weary NHS GPs for the inaugural *The Poetry of General Practice* seminar. The setting was ideal. A beautiful room, next to the 'Harry Potter' dining hall and overlooking the manicured gardens around which Alice ran; an oasis of peace and calm with a rich literary heritage.

The seminar is the brainchild of Andrew Schuman, a GP and poet, and his wife Sophie Ratcliffe, an English academic at Oxford University. They run the day with a guest appearance from another established writer and academic, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst. Andrew has taught medical humanities to local vocational training scheme groups for many years. This seminar is now an opportunity for established GPs to discuss literature in the context of general practice, with added expert insights from members of the English Faculty of the University. The tutors are warm, skilled, charismatic, and engaging guides, Virgil to our Dante.

Throughout a leisurely day we discussed carefully chosen texts with the aim of encouraging reflective practice, increasing our understanding of the patient's experience, improving communication, and broadening our understanding of illness and wellbeing. Using texts as varied as Raymond Carver, Edward Lear, Wilfred Owen, and TS Eliot we examined themes such as the meaning of wellbeing, pain, death, communication, language, and metaphor.

We read Kafka's *A Country Doctor* and, unlike the CCG e-mail, it made perfect sense to all of us. The doctor has to go on an urgent house call. But his horse (the PCT?) has suddenly and unexpectedly died. But new ones (the CCG?) mysteriously appear, and he is swept along by these 'ungovernable horses' on his visit. He is lost amid forces beyond his control; he feels the heavy weight of expectation; he makes a

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quick diagnosis only for a blindingly obvious alternative to then become apparent; he is plagued by self-doubt; issues and concerns in his own complicated life pervade his work. In short, he is you and I.

We also studied TS Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*. Prufrock is a 'heartsink' poem. A poor historian, he makes no sense, engendering feelings in us of irritation and frustration. Yet, as we give him the luxury of time and thought, his narrative starts to crystallise; he reaches out a hand, and we take it. Understanding emerges, like an 'unfinished' Michelangelo statue crawling out of the marble.

By the end of the day we all felt refreshed, stimulated, and excited by what we had learnt and keen to follow-up with a group reunion. Before attending I had fully intended to use the day as part of my CPD plan to discuss at my next appraisal. It would indeed be highly suitable, but choosing to do so would now devalue the experience for me. So, I won't waste the time ticking more boxes but will spend the time reading a Carver poem instead.

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*The Poetry of General Practice* seminar series is run by Medical Humanities Ltd ([www.lit-med.com](http://www.lit-med.com)).

### Competing interest

Simon Curtis is a GP colleague of Andrew Schuman at the 19 Beaumont Street Surgery in Oxford. He has no financial interest in this course.

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### STICKING TO THIS SOULLESS QUEST

*Bent double, like our patients with sore backs,  
Inwards we curse, observe but never judge  
As we treat symptoms, paper over cracks;  
Our tiring, caring hearts won't budge.  
Not having time to explore the roots  
Of patients' existential pain, and so  
half-blind,  
Drunk with fatigue; searching for any  
shoots  
Of change, or words that seem a little kind.*

*QOF! QOF! Alerts flash! — Prompting quiet  
mumbling,  
Asking the clumsy questions, just in time;  
To someone still not finished with their  
grumbling,  
And we flounder like fish caught on a line.  
Squinting hard through misty eyes in  
artificial light,  
Thrown by the incongruity, I saw him  
frowning.  
'Do your asthma symptoms bother you at  
night?'  
He answered me, spluttering, joking,  
clowning.*

*Too many measurements to keep up with  
the pace  
Of change in evidence, and in politics  
mixed in,  
With the science of counting and giving  
chase  
To markers of performance and all the  
points we win;  
Once we've ticked all the boxes that we  
could,  
Begged forgiveness for the QOF-corrupted  
wrongs,  
Realised the patient's more than flesh and  
blood,  
But a product of the community to which  
he belongs,*

*A warning cry, before ordering another  
test,  
To GPs ardent for yet more QOF glory,  
Lest you believe: sticking to this soulless  
quest  
Completes the patient story.*

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