"Pursuing immortality, we have become dissatisfied with mortality: attempting not to die, we have forgotten how to live."

Are we too busy to be happy?

I won't keep you. I know you're busy, crazy busy — possibly busier than you've ever been before — and none of us are happy about it. It's hardly surprising, and not a new problem. Back in 1660, Blaise Pascal wrote:

*'I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.'*¹

We are all too busy to be happy. But interestingly, Pascal asked the question as to why we are busy and came up with the answer that we keep ourselves busy to distract ourselves from the fact that we are ultimately going to die. He writes:

*'Despite [his] afflictions man wants to be happy ... But how shall he go about it? The best thing would be to make himself immortal, but as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop thinking about it.'*¹

Now, what I find curious is that the world of medicine is inordinately busy pursuing that same illusion of immortality: that we will not die. And it has got us into all kinds of trouble.

Atul Gawande, in the first of his Reith Lectures, asked the question why do doctors fail?² In it he spoke eloquently of how, as the body of medical knowledge increases, our ability to be aware of it all, or apply it all in every situation, becomes increasingly difficult. Furthermore, he explained that, because science cannot tell us everything, since each of us is unique, we cannot have omniscience. We fail therefore not only because of our ignorance or our ineptness, but because of our necessary fallibility. Although this is hard for us to face, one thing at least seems sure to me: because of it we will continue to suffer and die.

Society has bought into the lie; a lie that perhaps in years past we have been guilty of encouraging, that we have godlike capabilities, that medicine can solve our every problem. And because that expectation has taken root firmly in the minds of our patients, we find ourselves charged with being infallible and, as a

result, increasingly find ourselves criticised for not being so.

It's not only God that so many have lost faith in. Suffering in life is, sadly, inevitable, yet we busy ourselves trying to deny the fact. Denying the reality of death, we have become intolerant of even the slightest suffering and consequently made it increasingly difficult to enjoy being mortal. Pursuing immortality, we have become dissatisfied with mortality: attempting not to die, we have forgotten how to live.

Busy chasing happiness we are rendered more unhappy than ever before.

So what is the answer to our busyness? Could it be that, rather than frantically attempting to deny the inevitable, we need to face up to the realities of suffering and death and become more realistic in our attempts to avoid it? Counterintuitive though it may seem, might we be happier if we accepted suffering, and even death, as part of life? We live in a world which constantly massages the truth, portraying real life as more ideal than it is — take advertisements, the 'beauty' industry and our own Facebook profiles. Medicine must stop airbrushing reality and remind society that suffering is an unwelcome aspect of day-to-day existence and one that cannot be avoided.

If we stopped turning to medicine to correct every spot or blemish, remove every ache and pain, and curtail every cough and sneeze, believing such trivial problems unacceptable, might we not be freed up to enjoy life more? And might not those of us who work in medicine be freed up to focus on things that truly matter?

And might we all be less busy, and more happy?

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