“On the odd occasion when patients lead with their nouns, though, it jars: ‘It’s the pain, doc, it’s making my insomnia worse, and the anxiety’s really kicking off.’ Does this really tell us what we need to know?”

NOUNS AND MAKING A DIAGNOSIS

If we describe an illness primarily in terms of the nouns associated with it, we commit ourselves linguistically to making a diagnosis, the ultimate noun that fully captures the experience and hopefully unlocks the cure. This is a pretty fundamental part of our job, and, if we run out of suitable diagnoses, we are free as a profession to develop new ones as needed. Constructs such as functional neurological disorder, fibromyalgia, and post-traumatic stress disorder, however, only work if we can provide a convincing explanation of what is actually going on under the bonnet, and for this we need verbs. The benefit of using verbs to describe rather than nouns to define an illness is that it works even without a diagnosis, encourages ownership, and naturally invites action.

Of course, any consultation already involves the full spectrum of language, spoken and unspoken, and we all have more than enough to be thinking about without analysing our sentence construction.

If, however, you find yourself in a corner with a patient, and the focus is on things such as the pain, the leg, the diagnosis, it might just be worth considering whether another way of speaking about the situation, expressed through actions, might help it to move on more smoothly.

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