HASLAM'S VIEW



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Why do patients consult phone-in doctors?

THE CONSULTING ROOM COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE DIFFERENT, BUT THE CONSULTATIONS were just the same. BBC Radio Cambridgeshire had recently gone on air. I had been recruited to be one of their first ever phone-in doctors.

I figured that it really couldn't be too difficult. What do GPs do all day but talk without a script on anything and everything that patients choose to ask us about? The fact that the audience is slightly bigger is neither here nor there. After all, every listener is just an individual, and the fact that other individuals are listening at the same time is hardly relevant.

The biggest difference from my normal surgery was in having a researcher to screen the calls, and a presenter to line up the music between consultations.

I was introduced using a pseudonym. After all, this was back in the days when the GMC was still frowning on any form of publicity for the medical profession, and I felt I couldn't be too careful.

The first caller had a bee in her bonnet about milk-free diets and migraine and couldn't understand why her own GP seemed to glaze over whenever she consulted him. After ten minutes, my sympathies were with the GP.

The second caller seemed to be straight out of the MRCGP examination, wondering why one doctor in her practice prescribed antibiotics for her son's sore throats, and the other refused to. She wanted to know how to coerce a prescription out of him. It made for an interesting discussion.

However, towards the end of the first programme I had a caller who really seemed very unhappy. She had been to her doctor, and her doctor hadn't really seemed to understand what she had been concerned about and had told her to stop worrying, but she couldn't.

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So I asked her to explain her symptoms, and with a sinking heart I began to recognise both the symptoms and the speaker. She was one of my own patients. The unsympathetic doctor she was describing was me.

Obviously, the tinny sound coming from her radio must have disguised my voice, as she clearly had no idea it was me she was talking to. So I listened, and dutifully explored her ideas, concerns, and expectations, and gave her some advice as to what to say to her doctor when she returned to see him, and I wished her well.

She never did come back to see me for that problem. Obviously, the radio doctor had solved her problems well enough. When I did next see her a couple of months later for a different matter I was sorely tempted to ask her about it, but discretion seemed to be the wiser course.

I find it really quite bizarre just how indiscreet and open people are prepared to be on the radio about their health and emotional problems. It is extraordinary how often you will catch a phone-in on your car radio in which you hear men say 'I'm embarrassed to seek help about this' and then go on to explain their erectile difficulties, or relationship problems to an audience of hundreds of thousands.

Perhaps talking to a real human being face to face is simply much more threatening than talking to someone in a broadcasting studio.

Which begs so many questions which may just be relevant to the future of on-line consulting. Time will tell.

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