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Doctors as patients

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I'M HOPELESS AT BEING A PATIENT. IT IS, OF COURSE, something that every single one of us will experience eventually. After all, there is nothing about working in the medical profession that exempts us but it can be more than a little difficult changing hats and adjusting to being on the other side of the consultation.

This has all been very much to the forefront of my mind over the past few weeks as I've recently undergone surgery. Nothing even remotely life threatening – though thank you for your concern. However, recuperating from surgery has been a very instructive reminder of what life can be like for our patients.

As I've mentioned before in this column, doctors can be something of a disadvantaged group when it comes to healthcare.

They are less likely than most people to turn up for routine checkups, and frequently many of us really struggle with knowing what to do about our symptoms.

All too often you and I will have seen people with what they thought was a very minor symptom, but which subsequently turned out to be the harbinger of major problems.

So what does a doctor do when he or she has a similar symptom? It can be incredibly difficult to get it right. We may overreact deciding that every symptom is the first sign of a life-threatening condition or we may underreact, and fail to present when we should.

The past few weeks have really opened my eyes about the sheer practicalities of being a patient. For instance, providing something as simple as anti-embolism stockings to avoid a DVT is simple, logical and entirely worthwhile. However, the difficulties involved in putting them on and taking them off can be almost insurmountable if you are by yourself – as I had to be for a few postoperative days.

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I suspect we all underestimate how exhausting surgery can be. I was certainly completely unprepared for the extent of my postoperative tiredness.

In retrospect, I do realise I was warned. One physiotherapist told me that I would feel as if I'd been hit by a truck but until it happened, I didn't realise the truck would be an intercontinental juggernaut that was breaking the speed limit when it hit me. So I now look back on my career, and the many hundreds of people I referred for surgery, and I realise that I had absolutely no real understanding of what the experience was going to be like for them.

Indeed, remarkably few patients ever fed back their experiences to me, other than with gratitude or relief.

As each postoperative day passes, and I feel better and better, the memory of how awful I felt at the start gradually diminishes, and in another couple of weeks will be entirely forgotten.

When my GP asks me how it went, I will say:
'Fine, thank you, doctor.'

He'll probably believe me. Just like I believed my patients.

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