HASLAM'S VIEW



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A salutary tale of one man and his dog

TECHNOLOGY FASCINATES ME. I'M SOMETIMES EMBARRASSED WHEN I LOOK AT my desk and see the multiplicity of electronic gadgets that seem to have taken over my life.

As an Apple aficionado, I run my life through pads, and pods, and macs – a sentence that would have had a very different meaning a couple of decades ago. It seems quite extraordinary that a product as ubiquitous as the iPhone is still only a decade old. This speed of change frequently makes me wonder what other extraordinary developments we will see in the next ten years.

These thoughts have all come to mind as I've spent time recently judging projects that had been submitted for a health service innovation award. A remarkable number featured mobile technology, particularly apps that encourage patients to get much more involved in their own care, and diagnostic systems driven by early forms of artificial intelligence.

The potential is almost infinite, particularly with conditions such as diabetes – where a combination of therapies, data, encouragement, dietary advice, and exercise programmes can make a remarkable difference to the quality of care that our patients receive.

And yet, for all the changes, all the technology, all the computerisation and technological miracles over the passing years, some things simply stay the same – and they tend to be the things that really matter. Take the case of a man with diabetes that I well remember being discussed at a teaching hospital educational session some years ago. He had been admitted to hospital because his diabetes had slipped hopelessly out of control. The experts were baffled.

'A dishevelled figure in the audience put his hand up. "You're all forgetting about his dog," he said. The great and the good shifted with embarrassment and tried to avoid his eyes'

It was fascinating listening to all the great minds at the teaching hospital trying to fathom out why this had happened.

Biochemical theory followed biochemical theory, the charts were covered with unintelligible formulae, the bioavailability of his medication was unravelled, the cleverer registrars offered their opinions. However, the discussion was going nowhere until a dishevelled figure in the audience put his hand up.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'You're all forgetting about his dog.'

The great and the good shifted with embarrassment and tried to avoid his eyes. It was like being faced with the man on the bus who sits there talking to himself and who everyone wants to ignore. But he wasn't going to be stopped.

'I'm his GP,' the man explained: 'Of course his diabetes is out of control. Years ago his wife passed away. He was absolutely devastated by loneliness, and went out and got himself a dog. His dog became his life. For the past 12 years or so he walked his dog three times a day every day, and then sadly a couple of months ago his dog died. As a result he stopped going out for walks, and he just sat at home. What do you expect happened to his diabetes?'

Of course it was the answer. For all the changes, people remain people, and human behaviour remains remarkably unchanged. The apps may detect the data, but I suspect it will be humans whose wisdom will make the logical links. And thank heavens for that.

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