LESSONS ABOUT ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ELDERLY FROM MY TEACHER

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INTRODUCTION

Even if I have been properly introduced, I believe that a bit more needs to be said regarding my background. This is not necessary because I would believe that it is necessary to stress my importance further, but because my background has a relevance regarding what I am supposed to say here at my lecture. I will try to give the lecture in Italian and I am grateful to Dr. Gianluigi Passerini for translating it in Italian. I am also begging you to excuse me for my poor pronunciation.

I have never learned Italian in a systematic way and the only way I have learnt it was by spending my holidays with my grandfather and grandmother in Pirano, which is a bilingual city on the Adriatic coast. These are one of the most pleasant memories of my childhood.

You have heard that I am the chair of the department of family medicine at the medical faculty of Ljubljana. This means that I am heavily involved in teaching medical students and that my thoughts are more and more influenced by this position. I am in a way continuing the tradition from my family: both my mother and my grandfather were teachers. I am also a proud member of EURACT, the European Academy of Teachers in General Practice, an organisation which has helped me a lot in my professional development.

The second item in my background that might be relevant for you is that I am an honorary member of your association. I have been given this diploma during your first congress last year. At that time I have heard many interesting discussions regarding development of family medicine in Italy. The discussion which is still very vivid in my mind was a discussion about where do we get our knowledge from. The speakers have listed different sources of knowledge, from medical to non-medical. They have also been talking about different sources of skills necessary for their work. Little has been said about the source of the attitudes. This discussion has once again stressed the well known fact that people are aware of the knowledge as an important item in medical education, that they know that the skills are also important, but that they generally forget the importance of attitudes in medical education. I believe that you are all familiar with the different aspects of education I am referring to: that knowledge is something we know, the skills are the things we are capable of doing and the attitudes reflect our views regarding the things we are supposed to do. In the case of the elderly the the example of knowledge might be what we know about treating diabetes in the elderly, the skill might be how do we perform a subcutaneous injection of insulin and an attitude might be what do we feel about the usefulness of treating elderly at all. I believe that the attitudes are especially important and that they are the basis of any education.

Therefore I have decided to tell you more about the necessary attitudes towards the elderly and the way I have gained them. I hope you will find my lecture interesting. I apologize for not being very clinical in my presentation. I will be talking about concepts that belong more to philosophy than to the strict science of clinical medicine, more about the art than about the science of medicine. This is not to say that I believe that the science of medicine is not important, but simply because of the fact that this is an area where I believe I can tell you something about. Of course the art of medicine can be practiced only after its science has been mastered.

THE TEACHER

Let me introduce to you my teacher. He has taught me more about the elderly that all the lectures at medical faculty I needed to pass the exams and all the lectures I have heard at congresses worldwide. His name is of course not listed in any of the directories of medical teachers across the world, you will not find him at any medical faculty. He did not write any article to a fancy journal, although his thoughts were worth serious consideration. He was not even a very educated person and he has gained his knowledge from a long lasting experience and I was fortunate enough to benefit from his wisdom.

He has taught me many interesting things and I have learned a lot of skills just by repeating what he has done. The attitudes he has taught me which are relevant for you at this meeting can be summarised in only four short messages that I have prepared to share with you.

YOU SHOULD CARE FOR THE PEOPLE

He was a very popular per-
son, and he liked being around. Because of this attitude he was never lonely, even at an old age when a lot of his friends struggled with solitude. The reason for his popularity was that he had an outstanding ability of seeing the best in every person, no matter how that person might be seen by the others. He believed that every person is neither good or bad, but different and should not be judged. The time is better spent if we try to understand people around us than by judging them.

I have soon realised that we are living in a world where the young and beautiful are appreciated and the old and the ugly are not considered to be worth of recognition. We also tend to think that if a person is sick, bedridden or ugly, we tend to anticipate that he is also stupid and bad. The elderly especially have a lot of problems with that attitude. We tend to mix bad hearing with stupidity, slower movements with laziness and hesitation with ignorance. In that way the elderly become an unnecessary burden to our society, which is striving towards a brave new world of the young, the healthy and the beautiful, without the wisdom of the elderly. The doctors are one of the rare professions that have an obligation to have a different attitude than this and it is an absolute necessity for a good family physician to try to find the best in every patient. And you all know that it is not difficult to find it.

YOU SHOULD BE EAGER TO LEARN

As he was a fisherman by trade, he has soon taught me that one needs to observe closely one's surroundings, because by close observation one can anticipate the future and the storms that might lie ahead. He has always amazed me by his profound knowledge about the trade he has chosen. Although his profession was a simple one, he has managed to master it to perfection. His interest in new things never stopped even at an old age. He has taught me that a need to learn is necessary for survival and development, that we grow old at the moment we stop being interested in the new things around us. He has made me curious about the world around me and to look for answers to the questions I have often asked myself. He made my curiosity grow and made me look for knowledge. He was never too tired to answer my questions which were sometimes very naive or even stupid.

I have chosen a different path: not the one of a fisherman, but the one of a doctor. This meant that I had to acquire a larger body of knowledge than him and that my task in this respect was much bigger than his. This is a difficult task, what you all in this room know. Sometimes during the studies and afterwards as a doctor I got fed up of constant reading and attending seminars. But the attitude to know as much as possible is fortunately still alive and I still enjoy learning because new knowledge is always interesting. I am very grateful to him for this lesson, because I know a lot of my friends and colleagues who have stopped learning after it was not necessary. This kind of attitude reflects in their management of their patients.

YOU SHOULD KNOW YOUR LIMITS

When he was sailing, he has always been very careful of not losing sight of the shore and he was very careful that he did not venture into dangerous waters from which it was difficult to return.

As a young physician I have often been very confident about my capabilities, which has sometimes caused problems and harm for my patients. I have dared to do the things I have not been capable of. Every young physician has done some mistakes: trying to treat a patient with a serious condition without necessary consultation, fooling oneself that we know all the answers. Later I have become wiser. I tried to be careful in my conclusions, firm in my knowledge but very careful about the limits of my knowledge. I have seen that there are a lot of the things I can not do and that there are big limitations to our possibilities.

YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ACCEPT DIFFERENCES

We were very different, him and me. He was an old man, with his habits that have not always appealed to me. And I was certain that I annoyed him on many occasions, with my impatience and arrogance. But he always took into consideration my thoughts and beliefs. Only later have I realized what a vast amount of patience it was needed from his side to accept me who was so different.

One of the things that have struck me when I have started practising in general practice were the vast differences between different people. This is especially prominent with the elderly. Even age is difficult to ascertain. We are all aware of people who look like old men at the age of forty and the vital eighty years old people with a strong will for life, who optimistically look into their future. We can not find any explanation for this fact if we look into their laboratory tests, they are all the same. The first ones are bothering us with constant problems, the others amaze us with their vitality regardless the serious problems they have. Nobody really knows why this is so.

We are probably all aware of the enormous differences in our patients regarding their attitudes, beliefs, expectations. We
know that every man has his own priorities and his own views about life. Quite a few of us would rather risk a bit more dangerous lifestyle of good food, an occasional drink, a love adventure with a stranger, than prolonging their dull life into old age of loneliness. And as persons we probably agree that longevity is not necessarily the most important goal one should strive for. But as doctors we still often treat our patients as physiological models that have come out of balance. This kind of treatment is sometimes successful, but not always. The real masters of family medicine know how to adapt their knowledge to every individual they encounter during practice visits, how to assess the patients' views and how to take them into consideration while planning their management. The important role of the physician is not to use the somatic doctrine in order to tell the patients what they should do in their life but to help them in making choices about their life. This kind of cooperation and mutual understanding is the key to any successful treatment, especially in the elderly.

YOU SHOULD RESPECT HUMAN DIGNITY

The final lesson my teacher has given me was given to me at the end of his long life. He was always very proud of living an independent life and be in charge of all major decisions that have affected him. He never wanted others to help him unless it was absolutely necessary. Even at the moments he was seriously ill and was dying, he never permitted the others to make the decisions for him. He was always very careful that he was well informed about the options he has had and has not allowed any decision to be made without his consent.

Death comes to us all. Some, the less fortunate ones, will perhaps have to go through a period of a long disease, requiring constant help and doctors' attention. When we have reached the end of the road and when we are going to die in old age, the horror of death is not so grave as the horror of being a nuisance and a burden to our family and the people that care for us. The elderly patients are especially sensitive to this problem. The task of respecting one's dignity to the very end is the last attitude a GP has to show when caring for an elderly person.

THE FINAL MESSAGE

The educators will probably criticise me for this lecture. They will say that I have given you too many messages for 20 minutes. They will quote a very well known finding that people usually remember two or maximum three new things after a lecture. I have therefore tried to summarise my lecture in two messages. Here they are:

YOU MAY FORGET ALL THE LESSONS YOU HAVE HEARD, BUT NEVER FORGET WHAT YOUR GRANDFATHERS HAVE TAUGHT YOU.

OLD AGE IS THE MOTHER OF WISDOM.

Thank you.