



## The crisis in general practice

A traveller through distant lands came upon a healer. 'Hi' said the traveller, 'How are you?' 'Terrible,' replied the healer, 'I'm over worked and under paid. The stress is killing me.' 'That's no good. How long have things been bad for?' asked the traveller. 'Oh, many, many years. Come to think of it, my father was a healer too and he had to work too hard and never got paid enough.' 'Well,' said the traveller optimistically, 'I hope you manage to change things for yourself.' 'Change?' scoffed the healer, 'I haven't time for change, and I'm too busy just surviving to change.' 'Oh,' said the traveller and moved on.

At the next village the traveller saw a long line of people outside a hut. 'What is everyone waiting for?' asked the traveller of a woman at the end of the queue. 'Healing potion from the healer,' said the woman and shrugged her shoulders despondently. 'Every time it's the same...wait, wait, wait.' The traveller stood in line and several hours later met the healer. 'Mind if I ask why the long wait?' asked the traveller. 'Because I'm so damn busy,' snorted the healer while extracting several gold coins from the traveller's purse in exchange for healing potion. 'Perhaps you could do with an assistant, you know, someone to do more of the routine stuff,' suggested the traveller, feeling somewhat unsure of what to do with healing potion he didn't need. 'What?' ex-

claimed the healer while looking at the gold coins in his palm, 'and lose the deep and meaningful therapeutic relationship with the ill and infirm? Besides, no one can do any part of my job as well as I can.' 'Really?' said the traveller and moved on.

The traveller came across a poor village some miles further along his road. The children were dishevelled and many coughed continuously. 'Shouldn't you take the kids to a healer?' asked the traveller of a destitute young mother. 'No healers here,' she replied. 'They don't like living here. The nearest one is in the next village and I don't have a horse.' She looked very sad as she cuddled her child, thought the traveller and moved on.

The next village was far more affluent. The owner of a large and impressive building met the traveller. 'You must be a builder,' said the traveller. 'Nope. I'm a healer. This is where I work. Life's tough though. There are a lot of healers in this village these days and business isn't so good. However, I could rent you a room or two if you like...might help me meet the upkeep on this place.' 'You could move to the poor village down the path, lots of work there,' said the traveller hopefully. 'Move? You must be joking. I own this building. I can't move,' replied the healer. The traveller nodded but thought of the sick child.

The traveller was confused and sought council with the leader of the

This is a column written from the swamp. The term is taken from the book by Donald Schon<sup>1</sup> where he talks about the crisis of confidence in professional knowledge thus:

*In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solutions.*

1. Schon DA. Educating the reflective practitioner. Jossey-Bass Publishers 1990.

## Contributions

We invite amusing contributions to this column which should be relevant to the swamp and not more than 600 words.

healers. 'It occurs to me,' said the traveller, 'that healers and those who seek healing are unhappy. Why is this?' 'Well' spoke the leader while nodding wisely, 'we have many wonderful and ancient traditions in healing that we call The Way. These traditions can be difficult for the uninitiated to understand.' The traveller considered this and replied, 'But if a healer wanted to do things differently than The Way, perhaps it might help.' The leader looked over his desk at the traveller and, with narrow eyes, said very slowly, 'If he did not follow The Way, he would not be a healer.' The traveller smiled politely and left.