Losing the ‘Touch’

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The raging COVID-19 pandemic is causing unprecedented loss of lives and socio-economic destruction in its wake, so it may appear rather inane that someone is lamenting about losing the ‘touch’.

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the doctor-patient interaction; it is now either ‘on-line’ or patient is approached after donning a futuristic looking astronaut’s accoutre called personal protection equipment. As an old timer academic surgeon steeped in the ‘art’ of medicine as well as the ‘science’ of surgery, I must confess to being at a loss. ‘Empathy’ and ‘compassion’ were the quintessence of my code of honour as a physician, inculcated on patients’ bedside more than four decades ago as a zealous medical student. And now I suddenly find their simple expression towards my patients—the human ‘touch’—is gone. It was not called the healing touch for nothing, so it hurts to lose the ‘touch’.

I also lament for no longer being able to take bedside clinics and teach the undergraduate students various signs: palpating for the splenic notch, ballottement for a renal lump, ring occlusion test for hernia, percussion for free fluid in abdomen, difference between tenderness and rigidity, etc. As it is many of these signs were being sidelined with imaging; and I have heard many colleagues moan about how their residents nowadays see the USG or CT scan before examining the patient. But I am old school and in my naiveté still hero worship

Sir William Osler whose famous Oslerism was and remains my favourite quotation: “*I desire no other epitaph... than the statement that I taught medical students in the wards, as I regard this as by far the most useful and important work that I have been called upon to do*”. And now I am expected to take my ‘bedside clinics’ online with the help of some ‘app’! I am not a Luddite, and I know my way about laptops and smartphones as much as my students do. However, the term ‘online bedside clinics’ is antithetical and I cannot wrap my head around it, so it hurts to lose the ‘touch’.

The challenge of this ongoing pandemic has been rightly called a war-like situation with many casualties. I fear that the loss of healing ‘touch’ will have far reaching irreversible ripple effects on doctor-patient interactions and bedside clinical teaching.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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