



## NO HOLDS BARRED

## VIEWS &amp; REVIEWS

# Margaret McCartney: Medicine is a bit of a giggle

Margaret McCartney *general practitioner, Glasgow*

Medicine is serious, pressurised, and stressful; it deals with death, life, ethics, human suffering, tragedy, hard statistics, and the Krebs cycle. It's also a bit of a giggle.

I can hardly tell of the truly funny things that have happened in the consulting room, what with confidentiality and all. But some things get repeated often enough to be at least partly, and probably totally, mythical.

Take, for example, the GP on a house call whose patient complained of her washing machine being broken. Bemused, the doctor fixed the leaky connection, only to find later that he had called at the wrong house and that the "patient" had assumed he was an engineer.

Or the one about the patient in hospital who developed blue discoloration above the waist. He had all manner of angiograms until it was discovered that his pyjama top was new and that the dye was gently leaching into his skin.

Here's a gem from my own catalogue of stupidity. I had finished extracting advice on the phone about a patient from a delightful but deeply conversational consultant. Hearing knocking at my door and with urgent messages flashing on the computer screen, I tried to close the chat by saying goodbye, but I also managed to gush, "Love you!"—I had never met him. Oh, the shame; but it has also been quite funny in the recounting.

Don't we all have a bank of similar anecdotes? We could respond to these silly situations with significant event analyses, concerned faces, and forms to fill in, to prevent such medical misadventures from ever happening again. Yet the hilarity itself means that we can't forget, and so we don't have to worry.

In fact, humour often gets people through the stoma problems, the tiresome ongoing need for injections, or the readmission to hospital. There is subtle laughter as well as out-loud laughter,

a silver lining to the storm cloud. And humour directed against oneself is often useful. Laughter is infectious, is more likely when we are in the company of others, and bonds us together.<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago I was on a crowded train. The people I sat next to, one of whom was terminally ill, were returning from a weekend away. We pooled our food, found some wine, and giggled all the way back to Glasgow. I missed my stop because of significant inebriation. We found this hilarious, and happy tears fill my eyes now as I recount it.

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: I'm an NHS GP partner, with income partly dependent on Quality and Outcomes Framework points. I'm a part time undergraduate tutor at the University of Glasgow. I've written two books and earn from broadcast and written freelance journalism. I'm an unpaid patron of Healthwatch. I make a monthly donation to Keep Our NHS Public. I'm a member of Medact. I'm occasionally paid for time, travel, and accommodation to give talks or have locum fees paid to allow me to give talks but never for any drug or public relations company. I was elected to the national council of the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2013 and am chair of its standing group on overdiagnosis. I have invested a small amount of money in a social enterprise, Who Made Your Pants?

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Follow Margaret on Twitter, @mgmtmccartney

1 Scott SK, Lavan N, Chen S, McGettigan C. The social life of laughter. *Trends Cogn Sci* 2014;18:618-20; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.09.002>.

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