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All I want for the new year is...

As we approach the start of 2022, the Sharp Scratch panel reflect on receiving gifts from patients and colleagues

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'Tis the festive season of giving and receiving gifts. In medicine, as demonstrated during the early phase of the pandemic, patients and the public may express gratitude towards healthcare staff by giving tokens of appreciation in the form of gifts.

In the run up to the festive season, Gordon Caldwell, consultant physician at the Lorn and Islands District General Hospital, joined the Sharp Scratch panel to discuss the ethics of receiving presents from patients, giving presents to your colleagues, and how you could gift your colleagues positive feedback to recognise excellence in clinical care.

Gordon reflected on one of the best gifts that he has received as a doctor. He cared for a lady whose occupation was knitting socks for people to wear with their kilts. Nine months after her admission, the lady posted a pair of socks that she'd knitted to Gordon to wear with his kilt as a token of appreciation. Gordon reflected on receiving this valuable gift and the relationship that he built through caring for her.

"Most of the time, the gift is usually associated with a card or a letter, and those carry the most meaning." If you are not sure about accepting a gift, NHS England provides guidance on managing conflicts of interest when you think a gift may give rise to perceptions of impropriety and might influence behaviour if not handled in an appropriate way.¹

Lily and Anisha also discussed the financial value of gifts and debated whether you should add up the cost of the gift. NHS England guidance further explains that gifts valued at over £50 should be treated with caution and only be accepted on behalf of an organisation—these should also be declared by staff.

Pat recalled a time when she was offered money by a patient and the panel discussed that "money is different from gifts. Hospitals have a charitable fund where you can direct patients to donate to."

Can gift giving change the clinician-patient relationship?

"You should definitely not feel obliged to treat patients differently and not every patient can afford to gift," explained Gordon. He also noted that sometimes patients could bestow gifts in a manipulative way, although most of the time they are given as a token of appreciation.

Gordon considered other caveats: "social media could blur the clinician-patient boundary; patients could track you down on social media and send you a gift." The General Medical Council has guidance on maintaining a professional boundary between you and your patient. If you're in doubt, talk to your

colleagues and educational supervisors for a second opinion.

Lily reflected that gifts from patients usually reflect the quality of care that they received and the relationship you built during that period. "When patients gift you something, there isn't a chain of events where you and your patients are completely neutral, they give you a gift, then suddenly you build this amazing rapport and you treat them better. Gifts tend to come out of a good rapport so nothing changes. Most patients, they're not trying to gain anything, it's just a reflection of what you already have."

Gordon added, "the practice of medicine is a human relationship. In all human relationships, there is giving and taking. To be appreciated for doing my work well is important for the giver and receiver."

As a junior doctor, Anisha appreciates gifts as "that's what keeps you going, the little token of appreciation for what you did here and that it is recognised."

This may be a lesser known fact, but thank you cards can also be included in your portfolios. Gordon, who also appraises doctors for their revalidation, confirmed that "affirmations from patients can be used as evidence that you're a doctor."

Giving presents to your colleagues

Cards, chocolates, and even cups of coffee are good options for gifts for your colleagues to show appreciation. Gordon recalled receiving tokens of appreciation from students. It's nice knowing that young doctors and students have appreciated his teaching efforts, he said.

Anisha reminisced about the time when she brought back souvenirs after visiting her home country: "it's part of sharing your cultural heritage and this also reinforces friendship and shows that you value the team."

Gordon added, "small acts of giving really oil the wheels of how we work."

"I'm going to gratix you"

There are other ways of acknowledging your colleagues and expressing gratitude beyond gifts. Most healthcare professionals know that Datix is a platform where healthcare workers report safety concerns and Gratix does the exact opposite of this. This concept may come under different labels, for example, Laudit² and Excellent Incident Reporting.

Gordon adopted this idea from Disney. Disney would only respond to letters of complaint or of excellence from the public and not to feedback forms. Gordon

set up Excellent Incident Reporting at his hospital where people could gift stories to colleagues for excellent performance. In medicine, it's easy to overlook the good things that you do in your job and it's typical of medicine to focus on the negative.

Anisha thought this was a gratifying scheme as “not only is it nice to gift stories to each other, it's practical to know that you're doing something correctly during your rotation.”

Are you feeling warm and generous? Why not donate to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the chosen charity of *The BMJ* this winter. Your donations will support MSF's work in ensuring the people of Afghanistan have access to healthcare. Donations can be made at msf.org.uk/bmj

This discussion was based on a discussion on our [Sharp Scratch](#) podcast. Listen to the episode on [Spotify](#) or [Apple](#) pods.

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- 1 NHS England. Managing conflicts of interest in the NHS. 7 February 2017. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/guidance-managing-conflicts-of-interest-nhs.pdf>
- 2 Eastern AHSN. Feedback tool Laudit enables NHS staff to officially thank colleagues. 19 November 2020. <https://www.easternahsn.org/laudit-enables-nhs-staff-to-officially-thank-colleagues/>