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PRIMARY COLOUR

Helen Salisbury: Mourning meetings

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In pre-covid days, I would walk out to the waiting room to fetch each patient. This benefited my health (too much uninterrupted sitting is bad for you), provided a moment for greetings and pleasantries, and allowed me to observe how patients moved. Delaying the main purpose of the visit until we were inside my consulting room, we might talk about the weather or any number of other topics as a preamble to more serious conversation.

I miss this social glue. Small talk also serves a larger purpose: it helps to build a rapport and put patients at ease. On the telephone, I'm far more likely to launch straight into "What can I do for you today?" and miss out this important step. The shift to a more transactional style is not an inevitable feature of remote consulting, but it's something I need to guard against. If chat does happen, it's mostly because patients are moving to a more suitable place to talk, particularly if I catch them in an open plan office (it seems that such things do still exist—I hope they're well ventilated).

It's not only doctor-patient interactions that have become less rich and satisfying. I miss hugs from friends, banter and gossip at meetings, and side conversations and catch-ups in the corridor before and after. My tendency to arrive early for many online meetings comes from the hope that I might get to chat with a colleague or two before the business starts.

This liminal communication around the edges of our work is important for our wellbeing: in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it contributes to the upper sections of the pyramid, to feelings of belonging and self-esteem.¹ It can also provide a place where we find creative solutions to difficult problems or foster connections where unexpected collaborations are born.

Just as I need to work harder to put the small talk back into my consultations, I need to make space for communication with colleagues that goes beyond the functional. Asking "How did your holiday go?" or "Did you find that book you were looking for?" is a way of saying, "I heard what you said, and I'm interested." It's a way to convey positive regard, and we're all beginning to miss that kind of warmth.

Online meetings, where everyone can hear everything, are not a comfortable place for this type of conversation unless they involve a very small group who are all familiar to each other (perhaps we just need to pick up the phone more often). Hearing doctors say that they miss meetings is one of the stranger surprises that this pandemic has brought.

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¹ Wikipedia. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs.

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