Matt Morgan: We all contain multitudes

My fellow BMJ columnist Rachel Clarke has rightly argued recently that we should judge health secretaries according to their policies, not their appearance, after widespread public criticism of a photo of England’s new health secretary, Thérèse Coffey, “smoking a cigar while clutching a flute of champagne.” And there are plenty of terrible policies to pass judgment on.

But does the same apply to healthcare professionals who work directly with patients? What about the heart surgeon who smokes? Or the whisky drinking hepatologist? Isn’t it true that healthcare professionals can be hypocrites, handing out advice to patients that they themselves don’t follow?

I’ve felt guilty at work before now, caring for a critically injured cyclist after forgetting my own helmet on that morning’s ride. Although the adage that “you’re only an alcoholic if you drink more than your doctor” is untrue, evidence suggests that medical specialists tend to drink to hazardous levels more than the general population. Worldwide, over 20% of health professionals smoke, although this rate has probably decreased in recent times, with large variations by geographical region.

The lifestyle choices of physicians may even affect the advice they give to their patients. In one study, primary care doctors who were physically active were more likely to initiate counselling about physical activity in patients. Shouldn’t we be held accountable for our own bad habits? Are we not hypocritical in advising one thing while doing the opposite?

David Fleming, cultural historian and economist, said in his book Lean Logic, “There is no reason why he should not argue for standards better than he manages to achieve in his own life.” This way, we can view the health professional not as a role model but as a coach. As a player, the football manager José Mourinho had fewer than 100 games in Portugal’s second division. And one of the greatest ever football managers, Arrigo Sacchi, never played football at all. Just as playing elite sport is not a requirement for being a great coach, a healthcare professional doesn’t have to live the very best, doughnut-free life to support patients in making better choices.

There’s always a line to be drawn, of course, but it shouldn’t be drawn in the sand of better lifestyle choices, no matter how poor these may be. Doctors, nurses, and physiotherapists, like all humans, contain multitudes, to quote Bob Dylan (channelling the poet Walt Whitman). Perhaps striving for better in our patients than in ourselves is even something to be celebrated rather than ridiculed. Fleming concludes his book by saying that “indeed, it would be worrying if his ideals were not better than the way he lives.”

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1 Clarke R. Rachel Clarke: We should judge Coffey on her policies, not her appearance. BMJ 2022;378:. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o2201 pmid: 36104040

