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TALKING POINT

John Launer: Hearing words of wisdom

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Few of us could offer a precise definition of wisdom, but—to use the famous words of a judge in the United States when asked to define pornography—we know it when we see it. We can all think of colleagues who seem unusually wise. They listen, reflect, sympathise, and offer an analysis of the situation and advice that nearly always hits the mark.

For those who prefer to be more evidence based, there is now an entire field of research into wisdom, along with some well established ways of measuring it.¹ One such method was created by Monika Ardelt, now a professor of sociology in Florida. Drawing on research from psychology and the social sciences, she created a “three dimensional” model of wisdom that is now used widely. It includes elements of reflection (being able to look at events from different perspectives), cognition (the ability to perceive reality without preconceptions), and emotion (sympathy for others). Ardelt has described how these elements interact. She has also shown that people who rate highly according to the model not only deal with adversity better but also become wiser through it.

The model has been applied recently to GPs by Sabena Jameel, herself a GP in Birmingham and an associate professor at the city’s medical school. Her main research interest is “phronesis,” a term associated with Aristotle and sometimes translated as “practical wisdom”—or simply knowing the right and virtuous thing to do. (Aristotle might be astonished to know that his ideas make good sense more than 2000 years after his death.) For her doctoral research, Jameel looked for colleagues in the region who were identified as wise. She used a questionnaire designed by Ardelt that required answers to a wide range of questions on different dimensions of wisdom. She then interviewed each participant about personal and professional aspects of their lives and what made them tick.²

Her findings are fascinating. She confirmed how much “wise” doctors (and presumably all wise health professionals) drew on the full range of their life experiences, including their suffering, to build up their wisdom over the years. Many had been patients or carers or had faced other challenges in life, and they had integrated these experiences into their ways of thinking and acting. Perhaps of equal significance, such wise doctors seem to be happier and more flourishing in their work: 90% believed that it was good or great, even in these highly stressful times.

Reading Jameel’s research reminded me how much we are all supported by the wisdom of the people around us. They help to make our working lives tolerable in challenging circumstances and can raise our morale when we feel under siege. In Jameel’s words: “The time is right for understanding and teaching wisdom. We need to learn how to flourish, now more than ever.”³

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- 1 3-dimensional wisdom: can wisdom be measured? Evidence-Based Wisdom. Updated 1 Sep 2015. <https://evidencebasedwisdom.com/2015/08/31/3-dimensional-wisdom-can-wisdom-be-measured/>
- 2 Jameel SY. Enacted phronesis in general practitioners. Thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of PhD. 2021. <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/12197/>
- 3 Jameel SY. Wise doctors: what can they teach us about flourishing? *Holistic Health Care* 2021;18:52.