

## Oh, for a little humanity in doctors!

Not many laughs this last fortnight. I went to visit a close friend in a hospital near London who had recently had a breast lump and her lymph glands removed. I found her curled like a foetus on her bed in one of those grim wards that seem positively designed to make you feel ill.

I was shocked by how utterly drained and beaten she looked. She had been home since the operation and had sounded quite perky on the telephone. Yet after being in this hospital for only a couple of days she looked finished.

Physically, it transpired, she was feeling not too bad; emotionally she was wrecked. Two days before, still weak from the operation, she had been invited to turn up at 10.00 a.m. to learn the results of a scan. She waited all day. At 6.00 p.m. she was told that she had cancer of the liver and four small brain tumours. She seemed to have no idea what the treatment would be, whether it was worth having, what her options were, where she would have it, what the effects might be. To just about all of the hundred and one questions I asked her, she said: "I don't know."

"Haven't you asked the doctor?" I kept saying. Oh, she had tried. But he was so dry, so distant, always in such a hurry. It wasn't that he was rude, exactly, just that he never looked her in the eye, never seemed to speak directly to her, just barked questions at the nurse over her head, and grunted in reply.

"I kept trying to focus on the right question, but the next minute he was gone. In and out like a whirlwind. It happens every time I see him. I get so confused. He flusters me. Nothing comes out right. I think he's taken one look at that scan and consigned me to the scrap heap. Three people have died in this ward since I got here. All I can think about is whether I'm going to wake up tomorrow.

"Am I going to wake up tomorrow?"

Who was this man who called himself a healer yet could so effortlessly turn an illness into a trauma and so casually crush a fragile spirit long before the body had done its worst? Do doctors like him have no imagination? Has familiarity with illness and fearfulness bred something worse than contempt? Has it atrophied their very humanity?

What had this man done? He'd done nothing. Precisely nothing. I honestly don't believe it would have ruined his schedule to treat her as an individual rather than the next in a line of diseased flesh, and encourage her to ask some of the questions he must have known were crowding into her mind. A couple of minutes spent looking directly at her, touching her hand maybe, goodness, even perching on the end of her bed, would have prompted her to burst out with the big question haunting her most: "Will I die tomorrow?"

Into the valley of the shadow of death: Sally Magnusson

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## Announcement

We learn from the newsletter of the Society for Scientific Values (New Delhi) of two interesting new books on ethics in science:

Kapur IN: *Ethical values for excellence in education*. New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Ltd. 1996

Professor Kapur's book deals with moral values vital for excellence in science, education and society.

National Academy of Sciences: *On being a scientist*. Washington DC: National Academy of Sciences 1995.

'Whilst this book is primarily aimed at teachers and researchers in USA, the principles enunciated are of universal importance.