

Hypochondria

Hypochondriasis, also known as illness anxiety disorder, is quite common in medical practice. I experienced it once in my medical student days, and I think it has helped me to be much more sympathetic with patients who suffer from it. It can be severe and incapacitating, and always deserves careful counselling and support.

At the age of 20, after three years of intensive education in the basic sciences that included Zoology, Botany, Chemistry, Physics, Anatomy and Physiology, we started clinical work on the wards at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. A team of eight students attended ward rounds with a senior physician and his staff. Each student had to "clerk" a patient every week. This involved taking a full history and examination, presenting the findings to the team, and following the patient through his or her hospital admission.

My first patient, Mr Rundle, was a pleasant a pleasant builder aged 55. He told me that he was doing his accounts one evening, sitting at a desk with his hand behind his neck, and he felt a lump. This grew and other swellings developed, and when he came into hospital the diagnosis of Hodgkin's Disease was confirmed. In those days, there was no treatment for that condition, and he was told to get his affairs in order, and if he got seriously ill, to come back into hospital. Weeks later, he was readmitted and rapidly died, and I had to attend the autopsy. Then my task was to write up the entire case history.

Sitting in my College room at night, in the middle of this task, I put my hand behind my neck and felt a lump (!). I froze, the world stood still, I could hear the crickets buzzing loudly outside, and I had undoubted anxiety. It could not be true, it was too much of a coincidence, surely I did not have Hodgkin's Disease and was fated to have an early demise. The small lump remained, I did not tell anyone about it for several weeks, but eventually decided that I must.

Being on the Professorial unit, I went to see the Secretary of Professor of Medicine. "What do you want?". "I would like to see Professor Robson". "What about?". "It is a personal matter". "When you will have to wait, he is a very busy man, and he will not be back here till 5 o'clock. Sometime after that, the Professor came in looking desperately tired, and called me in. I told him of my concern, and to his enormous credit, he took a full medical history, and examined me carefully, and then told me to sit back at his desk.

Smiling gently, he said "When I was a 4th year medical student, and I got kicked in the testicle which remained swollen for weeks, and I was certain that I had a malignant seminoma which would be fatal. As you see, it was not. And in your case, my diagnosis is that you have a post inflammatory lymph node which is fibrotic and will slowly subside, and really is of no concern". After that consultation, I skipped down the steps from his office with the most tremendous sense of relief, and a renewed joy

of living. His example has helped me to be kind and understanding with all the patients that have had an irrational hypochondriasis with anxiety about symptoms or signs which can prove to be trivial.