Correspondence

The hazards of diagnosis

Sir,

I much enjoyed reading the paper by Professor Schattner and colleagues, on the hazards of diagnosis, and plan to use this material when teaching trainees. Perhaps, the authors would like to consider the following descriptions of additional examples of diagnostic hazards.

A patient’s past history of repeated clinical problems is slow to surface

Pain due to somatization is a common disorder. At the more severe end of the spectrum, this may lead to surgical interventions that have long been known to exacerbate the disorder. Normally, with such a patient, the family doctor has accumulated a thick bundle of case notes but has not maintained an ongoing summary which would alert a thoughtful clinician to the possibility of somatization.

A possible diagnosis is followed by immediate action rather than thought

Surgeons, in particular, like to act promptly and sometimes do so inappropriately. For example, pain in the right hypochondrium is common, as is asymptomatic chronic low-grade acalculous cholecystitis. Gallbladders are not too difficult to remove. This creates a situation in which surgeons may operate rather than attempt to fully elucidate the cause of the patient’s symptoms. No one is likely to challenge a surgeon who removes a gallbladder without stones but which shows some degree of inflammation.

A statistically probable diagnosis is accepted in preference to careful clinical assessment

Lawyers like to work on the balance of probabilities and doctors may accept the evidence of statistics rather than assess a clinical situation in depth. For example, this seems to have occurred when parents took their infant to hospital with a painful leg—shown to be due to a fracture of the tibia of uncertain cause. The parents were accused of child abuse because this is listed as the most likely cause of apparent non-accidental injury even though it has long been recognized that the infantile tibia is peculiarly susceptible to minor trauma. Subsequently, the parents provided video evidence that, when asleep, their vigorous infant thrashed around in his cot and may have caught his leg between the bars. However, it took 2 years of ‘round the clock’ supervision and legal wrangling before the parents’ name was cleared in the Family Court and a further 3 years for them to learn how the case against them had been mounted.

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