Overdiagnosis and the individual patient

Oxford
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The lovely thing about humanity is that at times one may be unaware of doing right, but one is always aware of doing wrong.

Vladimir Nabokov
The Assistant Producer, 1943
Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

Susan Sontag

terrible synergy of fears
existential fear
The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns

William Shakespeare
*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.
circa 1599-1602
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare. In time the curtain-edges will grow light. Till then I see what’s really always there: Unresting death, a whole day nearer now, Making all thought impossible but how And where and when I shall myself die. Arid interrogation: yet the dread Of dying, and being dead, Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

Philip Larkin
Aubade, 1977
Physicians are thrust repeatedly into situations in which the professional tasks peculiar to their status as physicians are linked to the existential tasks they share with all persons: maintaining a sense of meaning, security, and connectedness in the face of mortality and finitude.

- he could enjoy ... delightful floating sensations even while his body seemed to be convulsed, thrashing around in what looked to others like torment.

Sarah Bakewell

If you don’t know how to die, don’t worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don’t bother your head about it.

Michel de Montaigne
fears of patients
ALL-NITE DRIVE-THRU
SCREENING CLINIC

I'm obliged to inform you: You have the right to remain anxious.

Anything you say will be used to further test you.

If you do not already have a diagnosis, one will be provided for you.
fears of doctors
The human being, who appears to be thrilling and wonderful, may turn out at the same time to be monstrous in its ambition to simplify and control the world. Contingency, an object of terror and loathing, may turn out to be at the same time wonderful, constitutive of what makes a human life beautiful and thrilling.

In facing problems about the use of new knowledge for human good, we may ignore the ideal of intellectual exactitude, with its idolization of geometrical proof and certainty. Instead, we must try to recapture the practical modesty of the humanists, which let them live free of anxiety, despite uncertainty, ambiguity, and pluralism.

Toulmin S.

In practical disciplines, questions of rational adequacy are timely not timeless, concrete not abstract, local not general, particular not universal.

Toulmin S.

Skrabanek P. Risk-factor epidemiology: science or non-science?


“risk-factorology”
1. Don’t use antimicrobials to treat bacteriuria in older adults unless specific urinary tract symptoms are present.
2. Don’t use benzodiazepines or other sedative hypnotics in older adults as first choice for insomnia, agitation or delirium.
3. Don’t recommend percutaneous feeding tubes in patients with advanced dementia; instead offer oral feeding.
4. Don’t use antipsychotics as first choice to treat behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia.
5. Avoid using medications known to cause hypoglycemia to achieve hemoglobin A1c <7.5% in many adults age 65 and older; moderate control is generally better.
Our patients deserve of us accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment, but when accurate diagnosis is impossible and appropriate treatment unavailable we delude both them and ourselves by using diagnostic labels and prescribing specific treatments. When we as general practitioners are in a position to cure illness, cure is usually readily achieved. But cure only signifies postponement of death: it does not confer immortality. No matter how far medical science advances it can never eradicate human suffering or the fear and fact of death.

Uncertainty as freedom and resistance
To be responsible does not mean to follow the rules; it may often require us to disregard the rules or to act in a way the rules do not warrant. Only such responsibility makes the citizen into that basis on which can be built a human community resourceful and thoughtful enough to cope with the present challenges.

Zygmunt Bauman

*Alone Again: Ethics After Uncertainty*, 1994