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'It's complicated'

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"IT'S COMPLICATED," HE SAID. "No, it's not," I thought, straining every neural circuit to keep from saying this aloud.

"It's never complicated," was the bubble coming out of my head as I appeared in my own cartoon.

I don't consider myself a very good listener, although, based on published data, I must be. In one published study of doctor-patient interactions, it was stated that, on average, patients spoke only about 17 seconds before the doctor interrupted them. I give patients a lot of time, measured even on a geological time scale, by my reckoning. During these times, the specialties of pathology and radiology beckon. Which is not to say I don't like listening. I love my patients. I really do, but less when they don't respect my time constraints, which means, really, that they don't respect the time due patients scheduled after them.

Many years ago a dermatology attending I knew told me that when he informed the residents that he didn't want to hear the patient's history, they thought he was joking. It took them a while to learn, he said, that when he told them he'd ask for the history if he thought he needed it, and otherwise just show him the skin lesion, that he really meant it.

My area of neurology is like dermatology in that way. Pattern recognition



is the basis of most diagnoses. If a patient tells me he has a resting tremor, micrographia, slowed movements and a stooped posture, I will not conclude that he has anything wrong with him unless I see it. Movement disorders are not like epilepsy or headaches, where you don't see what

you get. Rare movement disorders are paroxysmal and therefore are like epilepsy, but the paroxysms are usually long enough that they can be captured on smart phone videos. What you see is generally what you get, which is a very attractive aspect of this field.

So, this patient began having cognitive problems, but only for "complicated" topics, not the kind that would show up on the two-and-a-half-hour neuropsychology test he tested normal on. One toe turns bluish at times, indicating a circulatory problem; one limb twitches if he sits in a certain position for too long, and the mental clouding that occurs after walking, or standing too long, is very debilitating. It's difficult to restrain oneself from saying, "OK. It's really very simple. If I find something on your exam I'll more strongly consider the possibility that you have a neurological problem."

There are certainly patients with complicated problems. Usually it's because a lot of stuff has happened – a

stroke, then a seizure, then a brain injury, then a tremor, or more than one organ system is involved – so that one must wonder if the blood dyscrasia caused the neurological problem or are they both part of the same disorder? Patients who see themselves as having complicated problems are generally extremely self-absorbed. Every twitch, every gurgle, every dropped object is a sign, and each sign requires recording as it may hold the key to the explanation

He did not want a test that might have revealed the diagnosis.

of the unfolding biological phenomenon of this particular patient.

While there are many interesting aspects to the patient I'm referring to, perhaps the most interesting was the response to my discussion of a possible diagnosis, as I thought there really might be something "organic" wrong with the patient. He did not want a test that might have revealed the diagnosis. He was clearly bothered by his myriad symptoms, but not sure he wanted to take medication to treat them, and there would be no cure, hence why make a diagnosis if the condition was incurable? I don't blame him for preferring to let time make the diagnosis, with new identifying characteristics emerging slowly, as the syndrome progresses, if it



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is, in fact, a neurodegenerative disorder. I might well do the same. But I got the impression that he might actually prefer to see himself as a medical enigma, someone who baffled the experts or possibly was going to be labeled as having a psychogenic disorder, only to show the fools years later that he had really been suffering a clearly identifiable neurological problem. I don't know, of course. I wonder what the point of the exercise was. I took all of his symptoms seriously, but thought only a few were part of a medical problem, the rest being collections of the usual "funny" symptoms we all have, but somehow manage not to worry about. Did he actually want a diagnosis or did he want only a diagnosis if it was something not so serious? Or, did he really want to be told it was "all in his head?"

I don't expect him to return so I don't expect to find out. ❖

Author

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The Ancient Roots of the Number Forty

STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

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'FORTY WINKS' COMES readily to mind when seeking a cliché to define a brief afternoon nap. But why not 34, or better, 47 winks? Is there a physiological explanation for the insistence upon forty? Or is there some inherent quality in forty that ensures that it will readily come to a mind already



distracted by other cliché-ridden numbers? Certainly in countless cultures, in the creation stories of many religions, and of course in countless legends, the number forty comes up with uncommon frequency.

Long before adult life had been newly discovered as "beginning at forty," well before the time when a civilized workweek was reduced to forty hours, certainly before forty acres and a mule were sufficient to provide a measure of security for a newly liberated slave, and millennia before a suitable punishment for minor sins was confined to forty lashes: before all of these, there were the many references to forty in the inaugural holy writings of some of the enduring religions.

At the Mesopotamian dawn of written civilization there was the Sumerian god known as Enki, patron deity of Eridu. He was identified, also, with other regional gods including the Babylonian, Nabu, and even Ea, lord of the earth in Akkadian cosmology.

Enki's name, written in hieroglyphs spells the numeral, forty.

In the Hebrew Bible, we learn of Noah, the ark of salvation that he was instructed to build and the ensuing waters of the flood: "And the rain was upon the earth for forty days and forty nights." (Genesis 7:12)

The number, forty, reappears many times in the Hebraic Scriptures. Forty specifies the number of years that the Hebrew tribes survived in the Sinai desert. And Moses spent forty days and forty nights on the summit of Mount Sinai before receiving the Decalogue from the Lord. Both Solomon and David each ruled their nation for forty years. And Goliath taunted the Hebrews, twice daily, for forty days before David accepted his brash challenge. The prophet Elijah also endured the wilderness of Judah for forty days.

And in the New Testament, Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights in the Judean desert, thus resisting temptation for forty days. And forty days was the interval separating the resurrection and the ascension to heaven of Jesus.

Muhammad was forty years of age when he was visited by the archangel, Gabriel. Muhammad then prayed and fasted in isolation for forty days before his pilgrimage to spread the word of Islam beyond Mecca, accompanied now

'And the rain was upon the earth for forty days and forty nights.'
(Genesis 7:12)



Noah. Mosaic in Basilica di San Marco, Venice

by forty followers. When one assists a blind person for forty steps, the Koran declares it to be an act of piety.

Forty days – or forty years – thus became a widely employed interval for sanctifying a fast undertaken in solitude or a length of years embracing a lengthy interval of holy purpose. In the year 441 CE, for example, Saint Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, climbed a mountain in

County Mayo, now called Croagh Padraic (Patrick). Local tradition declares that the saint had invested forty days and forty nights in meditative prayer while fasting upon the summit of this mountain. And to this day many penitent pilgrims, often barefoot, struggle to the mountain's summit.

There is nothing singularly special about the number forty, neither to mathematicians, astronomers nor even astrologers. And to those who delve into the intricacies of numerology, it is of passing interest.

And so, one vainly searches in the domains of ancient literature, in pagan religions, in arcane realms such as

Kabala, even in geophysical phenomenology for a hidden number forty. The elusive number forty, by mere happenstance thus emerges now and then as does any randomly chosen numeral. Even Schopenhauer (1788–1860), by religion an intractable skeptic, declared: "The first forty years of life give us the text; the next thirty supply the commentary."

The search for an incontrovertible meaning to forty, however, does disclose a biological reality that touches our origins as humans, whether we be deeply religious, spiritually indifferent or atheist: a normal, full-term pregnancy remains forty weeks in duration. ❖

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