

## The Consultation

(Clare McCoubrey, Year 3 Graduate Entry MB Swansea)

Alison Jones surveyed the waiting area again. It was pleasant enough, the walls covered with health advice posters mixed with the sort of banal art that is intended to evoke sunny, relaxed times. Not that she really noticed. She was more interested in watching people, in her own mind assigning each to a clinic. But she had been there for an hour and a half and she had exhausted her anthropological assessment. There was no one new. Admittedly Alison had arrived early; she came from a background where doctors were still held in high esteem and fear of wasting their time meant it would have been inconceivable not to have presented at or before the appointment time allocated by the computer generated letter. That time was nearly an hour ago. She knew that the doctors were busy with overbooked clinics and she championed every patient's need to be given time to address questions or concerns so was trying not to become impatient. Trying.

Dr. Philip Webster was on his penultimate patient. He was not in a good mood. There had been some problem with the IT at the start of the morning which meant that he had been unable to pull up the necessary results to make decisions in the clinic. This was now fixed but he was running very late. He had also seen on his smartphone that his secretary had sent through a batch of letters that would have to be checked over lunch in order to be despatched today and so meet the latest audit requirements on clinic correspondence. That before the Clinical Governance meeting at 2pm after which goodness knows what was waiting for him on the ward.

"If you take this letter to your GP they will be able to give you the new prescription and I'll see you again in six months."

"Can I get the new pills from the pharmacy in the hospital?"

"No, as I say, take this to your GP."

"But what if I get side effects? My friend Irene had an upset tummy when she started her new pills."

"These ones very rarely cause any problems. Most people tolerate them well and you should feel the benefits quite quickly. But if you do have any concerns you can discuss them with your GP."

"So I won't get an upset stomach? The thing is, I'm going to Spain in three weeks and don't want to be ill on holiday."

"I can't promise that but it would be very unusual. Enjoy your holiday."

"Oh, thank you Doctor. Thank you very much. Will I get another appointment in the post?"

"Yes, yes indeed. Goodbye Mrs Brown. "

"Goodbye Dr. Webster and thank you again. I'm ever so grateful. You're all very kind."

Philip Webster managed to maintain his smile just long enough to see Eileen Brown beyond the door of his consulting room. He let out a deep sigh, quickly scribbled something in her notes and after three attempts had filled out the necessary boxes on the screen to allow him to move to his final

patient of the morning. Alison Jones. Alison Jones? The name did sound familiar and according to the appointments log he had seen her twice but he couldn't put either a face or a pathology to the name. He turned to the written files. The last entry was not by him. As he flicked through the correspondence it became apparent that Alison Jones had been seen in a number of clinics in the last six months. As a junior doctor he would religiously have read all of these in order fully to appreciate how the patient may present today and be prepared for any questions or concerns she may have for him. Whether through experience, cynicism or time pressure, Philip Webster now found that such religious fervour passed him by. Eventually he recognised his own previous entry and skimmed quickly trying to pick out the salient points in the minimal time.

He turned back to his screen and watched 'Alison Jones' turn from red to green as he clicked on the name.

In the waiting room Alison had been so focused on willing the screen to call her that she almost failed to recognise that it was her name that was flashing to go to room 41. She always felt that there was a certain element of game show, or perhaps Advent Calendar, about going beyond the main waiting area to the long row of identical doors. She suspected that the unanimity of external appearance belied was going on behind them. She found 41 and knocked politely. A voice beckoned.

"Ah! Good Morning Mrs. Jones. Do come in. I'm sorry we're running so late this morning" Of course. Now he remembered Alison Jones. He had picked her up following an emergency admission, which had actually been quite nasty. She hadn't responded to his first course of treatment, which was unusual, and it had led to a prolonged stay. But if he remembered rightly, she was otherwise well and had eventually got much better. Aim for discharge this time?

"Do call me Alison. And it's not a problem at all; I quite understand how busy you must be." Mrs. Jones was her mother. Alison herself had never married. Not that she hadn't been close on a number of occasions. She was now of an age where it was assumed that she was a 'Mrs'. She loathed 'Ms' and 'Miss' was just ludicrous. She hoped that Dr. Webster wouldn't think she was being too familiar. She reflected on the social dance; he apologises for running late in the expectation that she will dismiss. He looked exhausted.

"I last saw you in October. How have you been since then?" It was, he assured himself, an honest and open question even if he had mentally already discharged her. Discharge. The thought of all the letters he needed to check cut across his conscience. At this rate he would only just have time to grab something to eat before getting to the Clinical Governance meeting. This meant that he would have to look at the letters straight after that and before going to the ward as his secretary left at five on the dot. Getting to the ward after five for the first time of the day was a recipe for disaster. At least a recipe for leaving very late, receiving some kind of dig from Sister for his tardiness, just before an opposing one from his wife. He realised that he had no idea what Alison Jones had been saying.

"..so although it's not directly relevant, given what else has happened since I last saw you, I thought I should mention it. Dr. Robinson did say he would drop you an e-mail to explain it all but I expect that most of your e-mails just blur into one sometimes." She took a deep breath which she hoped to conceal. She had been apprehensive about the appointment today and if she was really honest, the extended time in the waiting room hadn't helped. She didn't like to make a fuss and didn't want Dr.

Webster to think she was being neurotic by raising issues that weren't directly relevant to his clinic. She also didn't want him to think she was stupid by trying to imply that two conditions, seemingly totally unrelated to her, could have any common underlying cause. But Dr. Robinson had said that they may be linked and had encouraged her to suggest it next time she saw Dr. Webster.

When Alison had played through the appointment in her head, the ideal situation was that Dr. Webster would already be expecting her to comment, based on his exchanges with Dr. Robinson and that the two of them had agreed a joint plan. That would be ideal. The realistic version was that Dr. Webster had read the e-mail and totally forgotten to do anything about it.

Philip Webster's heart sank. He had no recollection of any e-mail from John Robinson – did he? Or at least not about Alison Jones. He had got to know John quite well recently, in fact the two of them had been in almost constant contact for about a month. That was as they empathised and commiserated having been hauled over the coals following a Serious Case Review whose conclusion had been dubious at best. But no, that definitely wasn't Alison Jones.

And he was still none the wiser as to what she had been talking about. He sensed the easy discharge and his lunch ebbing away.

"I'm very sorry but I don't remember the e-mail but let me look at Dr. Robinson's last clinic note"

Alison Jones' heart sank. It wasn't even the realistic version. She felt stupid and humiliated. She should never have mooted the idea. She should just have maintained the affable, compliant patient. She didn't want to be known as a difficult patient. The type you hear about on 'GPs Behind Doors'. What was it - the 'heart sink'?

As Philip Webster read through the clinic note Alison Jones tried to recompose herself. Internally she tried to congratulate herself for her approach. She had done the right thing. In this day and age if you don't take some responsibility for your own healthcare then no one else will. And she was angry with Dr. Robinson. It was his idea after all. She would never have said anything if he hadn't suggested it. Despite the attempts at a positive attitude she sensed a rising surge of disappointment beginning to overwhelm her. It was more than disappointment. She felt wrung-out and abandoned.

John Robinson's summary of his findings went on for over a page. Concentrate, Philip, concentrate. It was no good. He was tired and hungry and just wanted to finish. He tried once more, chastising himself for his apathy. Throughout his career he had vowed that he would never become the doctor who just follows the path of least resistance. That he would hold firm to his commitment to treat every patient as if it was his first and highest priority. That he would not dismiss someone out of hand despite his inner voice telling him he was wasting his time. Alison Jones may be his 21<sup>st</sup> patient of the morning but for her his time was important.

"I see. So Dr. Robinson thinks that his findings may be related to the cause of your admission under me?"

"Yes." He clearly hadn't listened to her at all. Alison had spent hours deliberating and selecting the words to balance assertion with deference, was questioning yet informative, seemingly nonchalant but communicated her real level of concern. The words she had just delivered with visceral tension from the bottom of her heart. Who was she kidding? Why would he have listened to her anyway?

Her thoughts of radical progress were transformed only to those of wanting to escape from the room.

“Well, I can certainly see how he could think that but I’m afraid I’m not an expert in that area. You would have to see someone who specialises in that condition. It’s not really something we deal with here. Your best bet is to go to your GP and tell them you’ve just told me. They should be able to refer you to one of the Tertiary Centres. I think from my perspective however, we can discharge you from this clinic.”

That should do it. It wasn’t a cop out. He wasn’t abdicating responsibility or avoiding the problem. It wasn’t that he simply didn’t have the time or energy to pursue Alison Jones’ concerns or that he hadn’t given due consideration to all the options available to him, with or without John Robinson. He was taking the most appropriate course of action for him, for Alison Jones and for the Trust. It was ‘recognising the limits of his competence’. In his mind’s eye he saw in stark bold black letters the charge which had stung so painfully in the Serious Case Review when he had only been trying to do his best, to go that extra mile for a patient.

Not only had he not listened but he simply didn’t care. He couldn’t see how frightened she was. How fed up she was of the last six months of doctors and hospitals and going backwards and forwards to endless appointments being the positive, rational, grateful patient. Just once she wanted someone to look at the bigger picture and consider all the symptoms at the same time. She wanted to be treated as a whole person. But each Specialist was just that. They were kind and clever but ultimately they were only interested in their own specific domain. There was her GP. She was lucky to have an excellent GP but it would take far longer than the ten minutes available to explain her situation, if she could get an appointment. Alison had so far refrained from the urge to seek the advice of Dr. Google, having every faith that the multiple doctors she saw all had her very best interests at heart and together would strive to achieve the best outcome. Maybe she was just naïve. She was tired.

“Oh. Really?! I wasn’t expecting that today.”

“You know where we are if you need us in future.” Best to put in that safety net, just in case whatever it was that John Robinson had been hinting at did come to anything.

“Thank you for all your help Dr. Webster. I really appreciate it and you’ve been very kind.”

“It’s a pleasure. I hope all goes well for you in the future. Goodbye Alison.”

“Goodbye Dr. Webster.”

Philip Webster managed to maintain his smile just long enough to see Alison Jones beyond the door to his consulting room. He let out a deep sigh.

Alison Jones managed to maintain her smile just long enough to get beyond the consulting room and through the empty waiting room before her eyes were stinging and the first tear rolled down her cheek.