



Chris Ellis

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The biopsychospiritual model

Almost all general practitioners and their patients have some form of religious belief although a few may feel it plays little part in their lives or the doctor-patient relationship. Most patients and their doctors, on the other hand, do share a common religiously based belief system which is not usually overtly referred to in a normal consultation. Most patients choose their doctor because they belong to the same community as themselves and this community usually shares the same religious belief.

Nevertheless in the South African prism of culture we have a wide representation of religions and I believe, in general, we are very respectful of this diversity. I was reminded of this earlier in the year when we visited Fatehpur Sikri, which is in Uttar Pradesh. Fatehpur Sikri is an old abandoned city in a desolate part of India. It was the creation of arguably the most enlightened Mughal emperor, Akbar, who ruled over a massive area of Persia, Afghanistan and India (Akbar in Arabic means "great"). After his military campaigns, which were as bloody as any in those days, he settled down as a perceptive and just ruler and formed a policy of Sulh-i-Kul (peace for all) which was tolerant of all religions (a revolutionary idea in those days).

Although a Moslem himself he also had Hindu wives and one Christian wife and invented a philosophy called Din-i-Ilahi (the common truth in all religions). He built the perfect city of Fatehpur Sikri as a physical expression of Din-i-Ilahi, where he gathered a community of intellectuals to debate the issues of the day.

Unfortunately there was one problem with Akbar's city and that was water supply. It was far from the nearest river and although he employed the best engineers of the day, they were unable to design irrigation systems big enough to supply the population. After his death the city was abandoned and remains a ghostly but amazingly spiritual place to visit.

We encountered a similar concept to this a couple of years ago also on a visit to India. It was in the interior of Goa, a small province on the west coast of India formally ruled by the Portuguese. We were driving through a small village and in the village square was a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. On the bottom of the plinth was inscribed a quotation of his describing a similar idea to Din-i-Ilahi. It read "religion is one of the many pathways to God".

As family physicians I believe we almost unconsciously follow a policy of Din-i-Ilahi, of tolerance of other people's beliefs, while still holding our own personal religious beliefs. Much of our patients' spirituality is enmeshed in their search for meaning in their illnesses. These searches are often formulated in the often repeated questions that we hear in consultations: Why me? What now? Where do we go to from here?

We obviously help in the answering of these questions by giving factual knowledge on the medical aspects of the specific illness but beyond this are more difficult questions.

Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist and physician, proposed that man's life was a quest for meaning. The Sufis agree with this quest but also ask the question, which of the thousand and one meanings are you searching for? They add that you find meaning by creating meaning. It is the poem to be composed, the song to be sung and the dance to be danced and ultimately the life to be lived. I find that in family medicine our privilege is to try and help patients both "find" meaning and also to "create" new meanings over time, especially with the continuous aspect of care.

I have the feeling that Akbar would have made a good family physician.

May I wish you a peaceful, safe and spiritual summer solstice and uncibijane omuhle.