

The last port of call consultation



We were about to close my evening surgery a while ago when a man came in carrying a young woman in his arms and laid her on my consulting room couch. She was 28 years old and her body was light to carry because it was so wasted. She was in a deep coma and had fulminating oral thrush known in isiZulu as *amalonda*. She died within fifteen minutes.

As everyone else had left the surgery, my practice nurse and I waited with the corpse for the undertakers to bring their bakkie to collect the body. The funeral attendants arrived and worked in a distracted manner almost dumping the frail body into the back of the van. It gave me an image of what it must have been like loading bodies into the street carts in mediaeval England during the Black Death.

These consultations that I am being more frequently called on to conduct I have called The Last Port of Call Consultation.

One such consultation comes to mind. The patient was brought in by his family sitting in a wheelchair. It was as though they had come out of some foreign landscape, having been on a long journey, pushing the wheelchair from agency to agency. The patient's eyes stared out unseeingly. One almost felt that the whites of his cornea were too big. The wasted face, especially the temples above and below the cheek bones accentuated the sunken eyes, which then looked slowly downwards, lifting occasionally to somehow seek help from some unseen presence in the room. The mother

sat hesitantly down and I sensed her need to speak and her personal journey of suffering. The patient's sister was a peripheral figure standing mute in the background. One could sense the invisible presence of other significant persons, who had been left at home to await reports of our deliberations.

The brother, the carrier of the family's story, stood behind the wheelchair. The patient picked weakly at the blanket over his knees and spilt some words, which fell down onto the floor. His mouth was dry and cracked. The mother and sister looked away.

It was as though we, all of us, had no one to turn to. More words fell onto the floor. The brother spoke.

A child was coughing somewhere in the waiting room outside, drawing time urgently into the present. There was a story. I wanted to hear it but did not know where to begin. Did the patient know? Did the relatives know? Who had they seen and consulted on their way to me? What had they been told? What did they believe? What did they want from me?

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