

Semiotics in the medical consultation



If you were in the hospital tearoom and were to casually drop the word *semiotics* into the conversation, you would probably be met with a series of blank looks. Even worse you might be asked to define *semiotics*. *Semiotics* is the study of human communication especially when we communicate using signs or symbols. It comes

from the Greek, *Semeion*, meaning a sign. It is really something we do all day in every consultation so the next time that you are asked to fill in a form and it asks for your occupation, you might like to write: Semiotacist.

So where does that leave us? Well, a sign is anything that stands for something else. It might be a physical sign that stands for an underlying pathology (called an index sign) or it may be an allusion or metaphor that the patient uses in his or her history to point to something hidden or untold.

Semeions may also be visible signals such as the mode of dressing, for example men signalling with their old school or regimental ties and women transmitting cryptic messages with colours and make-up.

Powerful signals are also sent through paralinguistics which is everything but the words themselves, such as how things are said, the rhythm, the pauses, the ums.. and the errs.. as well as the hand and eye movements. Another magnificent word I like to use in the tea room (in order to deepen my colleagues admiration of my genius) is *enthymeme*. I have never actually heard this word spoken so I make it up phonetically as I go along. Enthymemes refer to what is not said in the history but is inferred from common knowledge of one's community or the patient's history.

Traditionally a sign in clinical medicine is usually taken as referring to a physical sign such as an enlarged liver, a cardiac murmur or a rash which may be a pointer to an underlying physiological or pathological process, whereas a gesture or intonation of language by the patient or doctor can be a sign or symbol of an underlying meaning or agenda.

A good example of a semeion in every day life is the doctor who rocks up in a new, top of the range Mercedes Benz. Firstly, the vehicle is a symbol of excellence in engineering and reliability.

It carries with it all the advertising and innuendo of the perfect machine. Robert Persig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* discusses the same semeions in describing the visual aesthetics and beauty of the motorbike and the Platonic underlying forms that a motorbike represents. This is on one level. On another level a Mercedes signals that the owner has "made it". It is a sign of success but also, which is often just as important,, the owner may be able to deduct the costs from his income tax, which gives it an economic utilitarian level.

Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher, described cars and many other commodities in post modern society as part of a system of signals. A Mercedes Benz is not just a method of transportation but a symbol of social status, of income and of style. It becomes a desired acquisition. These desired objects are not the same for all cultures. They are in forms which are not what they seem to be on the surface but they are in a code that everyone in that cultural understands.

Our labels and diagnoses in medicine act in similar ways. HIV/AIDS is both a medical diagnosis and a social label. It is almost like a flashing sign. The psychosocial consequences of the label include stigma, concealment of the diagnosis, restricted activities or altered activities and mode of living. This goes for most labels and diagnoses in medicine.

In a similar way Susan Sontag in her book *Illness as Metaphor* points out the illness narratives of such conditions as cancer and TB that become symbols or representations of punishment, divine retribution or poverty on the one hand, or holiness or virtue on the other.

Reading and interpreting signs and texts (semiotics and hermeneutics) are part of every doctor's daily life. One can look even deeper to beyond the cause of the symptoms and the signs, the so-called double hermeneutic, and attempt to interpret the causes of the causes.

In this way you can get yourself extraordinarily confused.

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