

M i s t a k e s

This month we look at mistakes, counselling AIDS patients and tuberculosis. The Department of Health is completing a major review of policy that will influence the management of TB significantly. It is our intention to keep you up to date with the developments as they occur. Tuberculosis and AIDS remain two of the biggest challenges facing medicine, the government, and indeed the entire population of South Africa. They are both complex diseases that continue to defeat the science and technology that we are able to apply to the problem. We talk of the TB control programme and not about eradication of this Cinderella problem.

The question of what to do with the mistakes we make, on the other hand, is something we seldom face. Ian Couper does so with a level of openness and vulnerability that is perhaps beyond the courage of most of us. It is costly and even dangerous to admit our mistakes in a world where perfection is expected and litigation lurks around the corner.

S O U T H A F R I C A N
FAMILY
PRACTICE

"Trust me, I am a doctor" is frequently heard said in jest. Perhaps even more frequently implied in the way we are quick to give unsolicited advice in and out of the consultation room. Where we ignore our fallibility along with other human beings we close ourselves to much personal growth and learning.

We often hear about learning from our mistakes. I was recently reminded of a professor who used to boast about his enormous experience and skill acquired from all the practice he had been given repairing the surgical mistakes that his registrars had made! Perhaps most of us prefer to learn from the mistakes of others? This allows us to remain big and strong and not so vulnerable. When we function in this way we continue to learn, but from our strengths. In a sense this is the pattern of learning in the wards. As we work with colleagues and seniors we demonstrate what we can do and talk about what we already know.

On the other hand, a totally different kind of learning takes place when we look at our weaknesses and mistakes and learn to grow and improve at the opposite end of our strengths. I suppose there is a danger that you can become negative and unhelpfully morbid about yourself, but on the whole this kind of learning may help towards achieving greater balance and humility.

Sam Johnson