

A good holistic practitioner

Lewys Morgan

*The BHMA David Cobbold essay competition is run each year, awarding £250 to the best essay by an undergraduate healthcare student. This year's winner was Lewys Morgan. Next year's title is **Medicine as if people matter – patients, practitioners and communities**. The closing date is 28 February 2008. For full details see page 13.*

I am currently a third year medical student at Brighton and Sussex Medical School about to intercalate in experimental psychology at the University of Sussex. I aspire to go into the field of psychiatry when I have completed my medical training, although this is something I still have plenty of time to consider. This short story was written as part of a module on holistic medicine that I chose to take. The sessions were designed to get us to think about holistic medicine and its place in our lives as future healthcare professionals. As part of the assessment of the module we were asked to write an essay titled *A good holistic practitioner*. I chose to write a fictional short story influenced by my own perception of what holism is and how even in the busy life of a physician it is possible to retain a holistic attitude. The story is a glance at two people and how their lives are affected by the art of holism. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

She didn't leave the house much any more; she didn't have the energy to. The last time she walked out the door she thought things would get better, only to receive five minutes talking to an arrogant man and a bottle full of mind-bending drugs. She thinks they were called Seroxat or something like that. It didn't matter anyway; she wasn't going to take them. She guessed she didn't want to take them for fear of losing her mind, although sometimes she felt like that was already long gone, or maybe she couldn't take them because of the baby, so young yet so much work; it's tough being a single mother, she often cried. She liked to pretend she was back in '04 when things were different, baby on the way, man by her side, when she was bubbling like a freshly poured glass of champagne. The glass quickly went flat though. She knew she had to change, change her way of thinking, her way of living, for her and her baby's sake.

He didn't leave the room much anymore; well there was no point, he had no one to go home to. He became a GP to have flexible hours so he could start a family, the family never happened and his hours

became a non-issue, the more time he spent in work the better. He wasn't a bad man by any stretch of the imagination; in fact he was proud that he had a reputation of being very caring. His patients loved him and he loved their love for him. He didn't know he was going to change her life yet, he had always assumed that all GPs should treat their patients like he did; that of course was not always the case.

She had heard about him from a friend, one of those friends who doesn't half ask you a million questions. If she heard the line 'how are you, you ok?' one more time she felt she might explode. Although sometimes she wished she could just explode; would be better for everyone wouldn't it. She was unconvinced but hesitantly booked an appointment, ten to three, she guessed she would be out by five to three with a handful of pills and a pat on the back again. So she waited.

He looked at his list again as he did every morning, she was on there but he didn't know who she was, for now she was just a name, his ten to three. So he sat back in his soft, black, cushioned chair and began.

The seats were awfully uncomfortable in the waiting area she thought, they dug into her back. It was dark and everyone looked so ill, she was beginning to regret coming. She couldn't leave though, mum had the baby and if she headed back now she would be alone. She knew she shouldn't be alone. The clock hit ten to three and she began to break a sweat; she wiped her brow and listened out for her name. It came, she never thought she could be so terrified of her own name but she was, her stomach sank as she rose out of her seat and shuffled into his room.

They sat, strangers for a moment, until he spoke up. His voice was soft, he spoke with an accent that she couldn't quite place, and he asked the same questions they all asked. 'Why are you here today?', 'how long have you been feeling like this?', 'have you ever considered ending it all?' She had been asked these questions so many times the answers came like second nature. She was waiting for the little green slip to print out, be signed, for her to collect her pills, go home, and bin them. That's how it worked last time, but this time the little green slip didn't come. He just sat and looked at her. She cried. He touched her arm comfortingly and asked her what she was upset about. She had been asked that before, but not by a professional, not in an environment where she knew she could let it all out without feeling like a burden. It's funny, she thought, no one had ever really seen her as a person before, she had always been that condition that with a few pills you could rid her of.

He listened intently to her words; he had seen people like her before in the many years he had been doing this job. He was beginning to get a picture of her in his head, her life, alone with her child, no partner, no job. Mind and spirit affect body he thought; this was more than evident in this woman. No matter how many different pills he gave her, the cause would still remain present ready to pounce on her. His methods were considered odd by some of his colleagues; he spent numerous years in medical school learning about the functions of drugs and causes of disease, only to end up acting like a counsellor. But he knew it worked, it wasn't magic, or witchcraft, just simply listening to someone's problems and getting to the core of them. People were also under the impression that he sent all his patients away to meditate in Tibet for a month, or stick needles in their backs. This was not entirely true; he believed complementary therapies worked for some people but not for all, and only suggested them if he felt they would have a positive effect on the patient's life. He figured this woman just needed time, time to open up and figure out her problems, so he carried on listening.

Her thoughts emptied out of her, and for a moment a weight lifted off her shoulders. She gazed up at the man to whom she had just vented all of her deepest secrets. His eyes were caring, full of a compassionate glow, she knew he actually sympathised with her. He

handed her a tissue to wipe away her tears and he leaned forward. He spoke slowly and eloquently: 'A great thinker once said a part can never be well unless the whole is well, I am a firm believer in this.' He watched her eyes to make sure she was following. 'The whole includes your mind, your body and your spirit. You cannot heal one without healing the others.' She nodded at him as if to urge him on. 'Your worry is your tiredness, your lack of will, and these things will only become normal if you start to sort out your spirit, your body and your mind.' He paused to see if she had any reply. She did not. 'So I believe that whilst you are taking medication you should attempt to become more social.' It was difficult for him to suggest these things without sounding condescending.

She was a little taken aback by that statement, it's difficult to be told to become a more social creature when you have a young child. She wasn't insulted, just confused. 'But how?' she mumbled. He paused for a moment and then came up with a few ideas; he suggested joining a gym, but she didn't have time for that especially looking after her baby. 'How about a child's playgroup?' he proposed, 'many of these allow the mothers to stay and help organise the children's games, it would be an ideal time for you to have a rest and make new friends.' Her face didn't show it but this idea excited her, she had never thought of trying something like that before, she had believed that her baby was her load to bear and that she couldn't share the care of her child with anyone else. As much as the idea excited her it also frightened her; would she be accepted into a group of other mothers, was she confident enough, how would she find a place to go anyway? Just as the last question popped into her head he handed her a leaflet for a local playgroup. She smiled; it was as if he had read her mind.

He knew this was only a start for her, getting her to build up her self-confidence and make new friends. He knew she'd be back for some more advice and a new prescription of the medication a few times before she could cope without it. But at least he was giving her ideas of how to move on, move past the bad times and build on a new life for her and her child.

She walked out of his room, green slip in hand, she would take the pills this time, and try out the playgroup. She could feel something getting into motion, and it felt good.

He wrote in her notes and closed her file, he knew she would be back but he was optimistic about the future. He finished the day's appointments and walked to his car. He checked his watch. It was 6 o'clock, thank god he checked, he had almost forgotten. He took them out of his bag and swallowed one; he was used to them now, been on them for years, he could swallow them without even a sip of water, he thinks they are Seroxat or something similar, he doesn't pay much attention to them anymore.