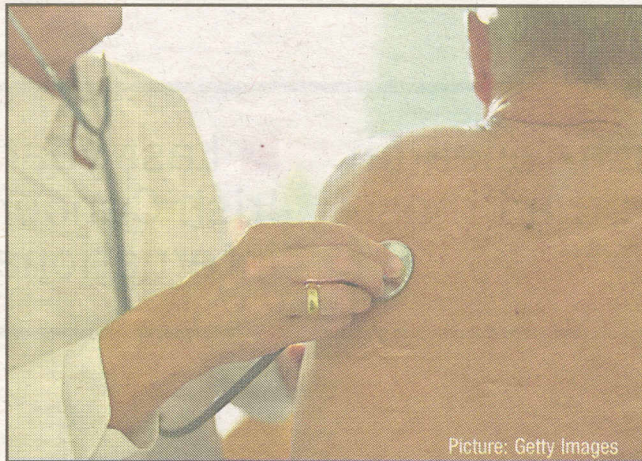


Kindness of people



Tony Humphreys



Picture: Getty Images

AT the end of November, I became suddenly, acutely ill. For somebody who hadn't been to a medical doctor since I was in a monastery, over 40 years ago, my initial response was that 'I'll get through this myself'. Even though the pain was relentless and intense, I stuck to the determination 'I can ride this storm', like many other emotional storms I had endured in my life.

I stopped eating and was not sleeping. On the third day, under pressure from my long-suffering wife, I went to a local doctor, but, unfortunately, was misdiagnosed and the prescriptions only exacerbated the illness.

This outcome copperfastened my notion that this was something I could get through myself. Three weeks passed, with no return of appetite, continued insomnia and weight loss of three stone.

On the Monday of the fifth week of the illness, from a place of great concern, a dear colleague, whose brother is a GP, transported me on icy roads to his surgery. It didn't take the experienced doctor long to diagnose that I was very ill. And though he couldn't put his finger on what the illness was, he immediately arranged for me to be admitted to the accident and emergency unit in the South Infirmery, Cork.

Within the hour, I was admitted to the unit and a team of healthcare professionals began the search for the nature of the illness. I could see that their first hypothesis was cancer, because all the different test results were giving a very confusing picture.

On the third day, they diagnosed the illness — a massive infection of gallstones in the gall bladder, which, left untreated for a month, had formed an abscess on the liver. On the Thursday before Christmas, they inserted a drain into the liver, and so began the draining of the poisons that had built up over four weeks. It took six days to do the job, but I was on the road to recovery, with one or two hiccups.

I was discharged on the Wednesday after Christmas. Spending Christmas in hospital was a transforming experience for me.

The purpose of this article is not to tell you about the illness but of the immense kindness I experienced not only from my wife, secretary, family, people I've helped, students and neighbours but also, unexpectedly, from the hospital staff.

Two years ago, my wife needed to be admitted overnight to another hospital in Cork, and her experience of the medical care she received was not pleasant. I also encountered it when I went to see her there. When I was admitted to the South Infirmery, I was expecting similar treatment and was preparing to do battle.

What transpired was the exact opposite to my wife's experience. From the moment I arrived in the accident and emergency unit, to my discharge, nine days later, I encountered professional competence, commitment, kindness, active listening, equality and personalisation. This experience was repeated with every person I met — the porter, the catering staff, the room cleaning staff, the radiologist, the cat-scan specialist, the ultra-sound expert, every nurse, house doctor, medical registrar and consultant.

It is not that, as a clinical psychologist, that I did not detect personal vulnerabilities in different members of the staff I met, but their insecurities and fears did not interfere with

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their professionalism and enduring kindness.

My own motto for living is that 'there is no greater wisdom than human kindness' and it was humbling to experience that from each member of staff I encountered. If I made every effort to individualise each of them and discover their first name, none of them faltered in remembering my first name. There was also a very visible camaraderie between all members of staff and a prevailing sense of good humour.

Understandably staff members experience stress, working 36-hour shifts, but they didn't allow their stress to undermine their commitment to care.

If the HSE is looking for a model of effective medical care, they need look no further than the South Infirmery, Cork.

I frequently expressed my appreciation to individual members of staff and the response I invariably got was "we rarely hear such appreciative feedback". It is what they deserve and I hope this article goes somewhere to making their professional goodness and kindness more visible.

■ Next week: What I learned from my illness.

■ Dr Tony Humphreys is a clinical psychologist, author and international speaker. His recent book with co-author Helen Ruddle, *The Compassionate Intentions of Illness*, is relevant to today's topic.