

The pathology of private anaesthetic practice – Anaesthesia – a ‘paper doll’ or a bridge between science and medicine?

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‘It has been shown that in my earliest professional life – student’s life – the tremendous subject which called for the attention of the medial mind the world over was that of Anaesthesia. To be able at will to master pain, and to inflict acute suffering, as it would have been inflicted, without causing sensation, was considered by many to be a modern miracle!’

‘So swift thy hand, I could not feel

The progress of the cutting steel.’¹

Sir James Simpson introduced chloroform (1847) – a man or woman was **‘chloroformed’** and a specialist in the art of administration was a **‘chloroformist’**¹

That was in the 19th century and today, in the 20 plus century, anaesthesia is in most instances a bridge between science and medicine. The modern anaesthesiologist has become a highly specialised specialist in a broad field of science and medicine. But anaesthetic practice still has elements of a ‘paper doll’ which I will attempt to explain in this presentation.

‘To be successful in anaesthesiology, it goes without saying that you must excel academically, but also an anaesthesiologist has to be incredibly detail-oriented, skillful at procedures, calm in stressful situations, and warm and caring to ease patient’s anxiety. It makes sense that an individual who possesses a logical, organised problem solving thought process, yet intuitive mindset, like that of an Inverted-Intuitive-Thinking-Judging (INTJ) Myers-Briggs test type would fit well in a position as an anaesthesiologist.’²

‘A career in anaesthesia involves unique demands that most people would not seek, tolerate, or ever grow accustomed to. Nonetheless, I believe no medical specialty is more fascinating than anaesthesiology. Based on thirty years as an anaesthesiologist, here’s my checklist of ten qualities necessary to succeed in this profession.’³

- 1. Calmness under intense pressure.** An operating room emergency is not a time for screaming, temper tantrums, or freezing. An operating room emergency is a time for calm, assertive action.
- 2. Vigilance during long periods of quasi-boredom.** In between those emergency occurrences, an anaesthesiologist must remain attentive without becoming bored or distracted. ‘Dad, most of the time you don’t really do much of anything. You watch monitor screens, talk to the surgeon and the nurses, and listen to music.’
- 3. Superior skills with your hands.**

- 4. The patience and motivation to persist through 25–27 years of training.** This cascade of years stretches your education past the age of thirty. During the last of those twenty-five years, when you owe \$250 000 in educational debt and are roaming hospital hallways at three a.m., your college classmates who chose business careers, are at home sleeping in a house they’ve already purchased.
- 5. A tolerance for sleeplessness.** Anaesthesiologists must be tolerant of fatigue and still be able to work unimpaired.
- 6. Compulsive attention to detail.** Avoid mistakes of any kind and strive for near-perfection... a touch of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder).
- 7. Thick skin.** You cannot be too hard on yourself, even though anaesthesiologists are not allowed to have a bad day. There are stories of anaesthesiologists who quit the specialty, become addicts, or commit suicide because a patient suffered a bad outcome. You can’t succumb.
- 8. Excellent communication skills.** You must be someone who can sell yourself to a patient in ten minutes. Anaesthesiologists typically have ten minutes before surgery to interview a patient, examine them, obtain their consent, and gain their trust. A successful anaesthesiologist must also cooperate with different teams of surgeons, nurses, and medical techs every day. Surgeon personalities come in all varieties – some are demanding, some are condescending, and some are bullies. You have to work effectively with all types of surgeons, whether you admire that individual’s personality or not.
- 9. Intelligence.**
- 10. A love for helping people.**

In anaesthetic practice and, for that matter, any practice or career, you have to plan ahead because changes can happen suddenly and at the end you can’t start to ride a Harley Davidson at 70! You have to consider the future, the next step, all the time and while

starting a practice decide on a “paper doll” or “bridge between science and medicine” type of practice. What is the moral of the paper doll? *‘Unfortunately, a boy comes along who snips the dolls into little pieces. But the little girl eventually learns that the dolls persist in her memory, figures of imagination, the nature of memory, and artistic creation.’*⁴

You might prefer to have a practice of only short anaesthetic cases, e.g. dental, tonsils, scopes, etc. or to do longer and more complicated surgical/anaesthetic cases, e.g. neurosurgery, cardiothoracic surgery, paediatric surgery, etc. and then cross the bridge to the ICU and continuous pain management (prolonged patient care). Every case nevertheless remains a sort of a paper doll which is cut up in the end and then a new one is started. We therefore lack (unlike surgeons) the personal feedback from patients in anaesthetic practice which gives us some freedom but also perhaps a certain loss of satisfaction. The patients sometimes do not even remember our name!

Stress results when certain situation demands are appraised by the individual as exceeding his/her resources and leads to undesirable consequences. Sixty-five per cent of anaesthetists are moderately stressed. Twenty per cent of anaesthetists are very stressed and excessive stress leads to impaired health and impaired performance. Forty per cent of anaesthetists suffer from high levels of stress and burnout.⁵

How to manage stress – in short⁵

- Take control
- Get organised
- Share responsibility
- Keep up to date
- Schedule breaks
- Keep healthy

How to cope

*‘Nothing, Lucilius, is ours, except time. What pleased me today? What progress, you ask, have I made? – I have begun to be a friend to myself; such a person can never be alone and such a man is a friend to all mankind. It is not that we have a short time to live but that we waste a lot of it.’*⁶

Seneca says: *‘We are worn out by useless tasks, ambition, hope of profit, occupied by other people’s money or complaining about our own, never satisfied with what we do, aim for, achieved or in constant fear of danger, so much so that: it is a small part of life we really live.’*

At the end of your life hold an audit and see how much of your time has been taken up by a money-lender, by a mistress, a patron, a client, quarrelling with your wife, punishing your slaves, dashing about the city on social obligations, etc.

How few days have passed as you planned, when were you ever at your own disposal, your face wore its natural expression, your mind undisturbed and in the end how little of your own was left to you?’

Then he asks the devastating question: *‘Aren’t you ashamed to keep for yourself just the remnants of your life, and to devote to wisdom only that time which cannot be spent on any business? How late is it to begin really to live just when life must end! How stupid to forget our mortality, and put off sensible plans to our fiftieth and sixtieth years, aiming to begin life from a point at which few have arrived! Is it really so pleasant to die in harness?’*⁷

The best way to live

- have a very simple lifestyle
- be kind to those around you
- surround yourself with friends

– that way you’ll be able to satisfy most of your desires.

Epicurus: Ancient Greek philosopher from Samos 341–270 BC.⁸

The seven rules of Stephen Gatt on personal health⁵

- Have a GP
- Don’t self-medicate
- Have breakfast and lunch
- Exercise
- Make time for leisure: music, books, art, conversation, cuddles and sex
- Take sick leave if you are sick
- Have an annual review – take a look at life...⁶

Last remark

Start your practice the way you want to end it, e.g. if you are going to play golf on a Wednesday afternoon or going to play poker every Thursday evening, do it right from the beginning in order for all to know that you are not going to be available on these days/evenings. It’s your life. It’s your choice.

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