

## **‘WRITING PRESCRIPTIONS IS EASY...’: FRANZ KAFKA AND HIS COUNTRY DOCTOR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*‘Writing prescriptions is easy...’ This sub-theme of the Congress derives from a rueful reflection in Franz Kafka’s short story *A country doctor*. In this story, a night call from hell vividly illustrates the not-so-easy part of the doctor’s life. But what would happen if Kafka’s unfortunate GP presented his ‘case’ in a Balint group? And is Kafka offering himself as a suitable case for treatment?*

During my early days as a family doctor over 30 years ago I kept coming across a quotation from a story by Franz Kafka called *A country doctor*. The quotation was:

*To write prescriptions is easy but to come to an understanding with people is hard.*

It was originally used as the epigraph to one of the early books written by Michael Balint and his group in London. The book was called *Treatment or Diagnosis: a study of repeat prescriptions in general practice* and it is still worth reading. But the quotation kept cropping up in lectures and articles. This was in the 1970s when general practice was re-invented as a speciality in its own right. Far from being inferior to the hospital specialists, we GPs felt that we could provide a personal service to patients that no other doctor could offer. And Kafka’s words seemed to encapsulate everything we stood for. Our mission was - and is - not just to scribble on the pad but to connect with our patients as human beings. To reach out to them with empathy, compassion and continuity. Everyone I spoke to seemed to know the quotation but, strangely, no one had read the story. Years later, when I finally read it myself, I was astonished by its power and its strange dream like quality. Not only was it a wonderful piece of writing, but the author seemed to have such an intimate knowledge of what it felt like to be a doctor. Had he ever studied medicine? I didn’t think so. And being by Kafka the story must have all sorts of other meaning as well that I might not have figured out. When I telephoned an old friend who is an English professor, he told me that it wasn’t really about doctors at all. But I was not entirely convinced. I became obsessed with the story. I read about it. I wrote about it. I gave seminars to trainee GPs about it. And I tried to learn as much as I could about Franz Kafka. He was born in Prague in 1883 into the minority Jewish community in Prague who were German speaking. Although Kafka was fluent in Czech as well, he wrote only in German. He worked as a lawyer in the state workers’ insurance agency in Prague and did his writing at night. He was not very well known in his life time but, since his death, he has become one of the most famous, most written about and most perplexing authors of the twentieth century. He was a very troubled person, full of anxieties and psychosomatic symptoms. His name has become associated in the word *Kafkaesque* with the idea of a world in which a small insignificant person struggles desperately with an unfeeling bureaucracy. He also had a great sense of humour. Franz Kafka died at the age of 40, having written three unfinished, unpublished novels, together with letters, diaries

and lots of short stories some of which were published in his lifetime. One of these was *A Country Doctor* (Ein Landarzt).

At this point, I should tell you something about the story. Or maybe refresh your memories if you already know it.

The story begins in the first person. The country doctor is speaking:

*I was in great perplexity; I had to start on an urgent journey; a seriously ill patient was waiting for me in a village ten miles off; a thick blizzard of snow filled all the spaces between him and me. I had a gig, a light open carriage with big wheels, exactly right for our country roads; muffled in furs, my bag of instruments in my hand, I was in the courtyard all ready for the journey; but there was no horse to be had, no horse.*

We learn that the doctor's horse has died in the night and he has been unable to borrow one in spite of the efforts of his servant girl Rose. Then the story takes a magical or dream like turn. Out of an old pigsty emerge two splendid horses and a groom who seems to be in charge of them. Problem solved? Yes and no. The groom turns out to be a demonic character who is intent on raping poor little Rose. The doctor finds himself being carried away in the open carriage by the furiously galloping horses and unable to protect Rose from the groom. As in a dream, the gig arrives at the patient's village almost instantaneously and the doctor has to concentrate on his work, despite the agonies of his private life.

*"You're coming with me," I said to the groom, "or I won't go, urgent as my journey is. I'm not thinking of paying for it by handing the girl over to you." "Gee up!" he said; clapped his hands; the gig whirled off like a log in a stream; I could just hear the door of my house splitting and bursting as the groom charged at it and then I was deafened and blinded by a storming rush that steadily buffeted all my senses. But this only for a moment, since, as if my patient's farmyard had opened out just before my courtyard gate, I was already there; the horses had come quietly to a standstill; the blizzard had stopped; moonlight all around; my patient's parents hurried out of the house, his sister behind them; I was almost lifted out of the gig;*

The patient is a young man who, at first sight appears to have taken to his bed out of sheer laziness. The doctor is furious that he has been dragged out on a totally unnecessary house call in the middle of the night. He grumbles about the way everyone abuses his professional position and his good nature. *My horse was dead, and not a single person in the village would lend me another. I had to get my team out of the pigsty; if they hadn't chanced to be horses, I would have to travel with swine. That was how it was. And I nodded to the family. They knew nothing about it and had they known, would not have believed it. To write prescriptions is easy but to come to an understanding with people is hard. Well, this should be the end of my visit. I had once again been called out needlessly...*

I think plenty of modern day doctors would relate to that feeling. But the family don't accept his perfunctory diagnosis. The sister waves a blood soaked towel in his face. Even the two horses who have managed to poke their heads through the windows (a wonderful comic visual touch) seem to be urging the doctor to take another look. When he does so he discovers that the boy has a terrible wound in his side in which horrible worms are wriggling. He is surely going to die. *Poor boy, you were past helping; I had discovered your great wound; this blossom in your side was destroying you...* Will you save me? pleads the boy.

But the doctor just goes on grumbling to himself about how people expect him to do the impossible. Suddenly the family and the village elders jump on him, strip all his clothes off and put him in bed naked with the patient while a school choir assembles outside and sings a little folk song. Meanwhile the doctor and patient are talking. The boy is angry and resentful. The doctor agrees he is useless. Must I be content with that excuse? Asks the boy. Then more sadly: *'Oh I suppose I must, I always have to be content. I came into the world with a beautiful wound; that's all I was endowed with.'*

Rather disgracefully, the doctor now tries to reassure the young man that his wound is only trivial so that he can make his escape. Hastily he gathers up his fur coat and equipment and - still naked- leaps through the window onto the back of one of the horses. The journey back is painfully slow and the doctor laments the ruin of his life and his practice – all because of one wrong decision.

So that's the story. It's brilliant, exciting, disturbing, baffling. You must certainly go away and read it. But what is it about? It certainly seems to me to have a message for doctors but there are of course all sorts of other things going on as well. Kafka is a writer whose work has been the subject of all sorts of interpretations: political, religious, biographical and existential to list only a few. But before we get into that I think we should take the story at its face value. What we have is an elderly GP telling a story about an encounter with a patient. Is it a suitable case for a Balint group? You bet it is. So let us imagine that the Doctor is a member of *our* Balint group. He is one of us and he has just presented his case. How will our group receive it? What will we think of him?

First of all, we will have a lot of sympathy over the death of the horse. It's true that not many country doctors do their visits by horse and cart these days, but substitute a flat car battery and the situation is the same. Then there is the question of the young girl, Rose, and the groom. How often have we all had to deal with a medical emergency just at the time when there is a huge crisis in our private life? We urgently need to talk to a wife or husband who is threatening to leave, or a teenage son who seems to be taking drugs. Or there just been a burglary or the roof is leaking. But instead of being able to deal with our own lives we have to rush off and help some patient or other. It may be that Mrs Jones who is always calling us out for nothing. But we have to go - just in case this time it really is a heart attack.

Then we get to the point where the doctor takes his first look at the patient, that frail, thin young man lying in his bed. The boy puts his arms round the doctor's neck and says 'Doctor, let me die'. That is quite disturbing. He is suicidal! What will the doctor do? But the doctor is too pre-occupied with his personal problems to care very much. We are a

little shocked at his frankness. At any rate, he allows the young man's family to show him hospitality: the sister helps him off with his coat; the father offers him a glass of rum. They are trying to coax him into a better mood, just as our patients do when they sense that we are preoccupied and grumpy. Then, after a very brief examination, our doctor concludes that there is nothing wrong with the boy. He is 'in good health and best kicked out of bed at once.' Then he starts complaining to the group about how he is abused and how the community take advantage of his good nature. *'Though badly paid I am open handed and always willing to assist the poor'*. No one appreciates him. Writing prescriptions is easy, he observes, communicating with people is hard. We doctors in the group are nodding in agreement. Several of us would like to add our own comments about the terrible ways in which doctors are treated these days by ignorant peasants. But the group leader intervenes and asks us to allow our doctor to finish his presentation. Now he comes to the point where he is persuaded to take another look at the boy and discovers the terrible, fatal wound in his side. Again we doctors are nodding our heads in sympathy. We have all been there. Dismissed a patient's symptoms as trivial and then discovered that he was fatally ill. The family are now pleased that the doctor has begun to take their son seriously. The house begins to fill up with friends and neighbours. The village elders arrive. The school choir assemble outside the door with their teacher! The horses are still watching through the window. There is a lot of comedy in Kafka. Don't let anyone tell you that his stories are depressing. Now the family and the elders strip off the doctor's clothes and put him naked in bed with the patient! Has this ever happened to you? The doctor might ask us, his friends in the group. At first we shake our heads, then we think: wait a minute. I do know what it's like to feel naked in a consultation. And so close to my patient we are almost the same person. Then he admits to another big mistake. He has lied to the patient. Although he knows the boy is going to die, he gives him false reassurance. All he wants to do is to escape from the situation as soon as possible and get back home to save Rose. And to save his practice.

Now it's time for the group discussion. We all have a lot to say. Our leader has difficulty getting us to speak one at a time, we are so excited. At first we avoid talking about the doctor's mistakes and his unprofessional behaviour. We all agree that doctors are exploited, no one appreciates us, the peasants are all a greedy ignorant mob. The government should provide us with free horses and we shouldn't have to do night calls. We should get more pay. And more respect. The leader lets this go for a while and then tries to bring us back to the doctor patient relationship. Gradually we start to examine our own feelings.

How easy it is to get angry when you feel abused. How easy and how dangerous not listen to the patient and his family properly. How important to do a thorough examination. We avoid harsh criticism of our friend because we have all done similar things. And felt ashamed, and then made the same mistake again. What about the patient? How would it feel to be in his shoes? Or as he has no shoes, to be in his bed with that terrible wound? He seems to know that he is going to die. Is he frightened? He is angry with the old man who can only say that isn't easy for him either. We reflect on the boy's remark that 'I came into the world with a beautiful wound: that's all I was endowed with.' What did he mean by that? The group leader thinks he knows but he is not saying. Certainly we agree that the boy might be expecting some compassion, some

understanding and a doctor who will answer his questions, stay a while with him and give him as much comfort as he can. Some of us feel rather critical of the doctor now. But we don't say anything because we are sad for him and we suspect that, underneath the anger and despair, he is feeling guilty. Was his practice really ruined because of that one profoundly disturbing night call? Is he suffering from burnout? Some of these things are a bit personal to talk about with a doctor we don't know very well. We end on a note of uncertainty as often happens in Balint groups. Hopefully the doctor has at least felt better for having told his story, made his confession and not been rejected as a person. Does he really understand that he has behaved rather badly? Or does he only feel self-pity? Hard to say. But the rest of us have all learned something about ourselves.

Now some of you may be thinking: this is all very well and at first I was convinced that the Country Doctor was a real person. But he is really only a fictional character who belongs in the mind of his creator. So shouldn't we have Franz Kafka presenting the case at our Balint group? Well, ladies and gentlemen, he was there, all along. While we were listening to the doctor we were also hearing about the thoughts and feelings and anxieties of Franz Kafka. What do we know about Kafka's life that might help us to understand the more puzzling aspects of the doctor's story? At this point a professor of literature if there is one on the audience might stand up and say: the author's life story is irrelevant. Literary criticism should stick to the text and not try to make guesses based on the life of the author. To this I would say, but we are all doctors and psychotherapists.

A text to us is like the symptoms of an illness. We can't resist the urge to encourage the patient to tell us more about himself. And Kafka's life is so interesting that even the professors make an exception and have written millions of words about the relationship of Kafka's life to his work.

So how did this young man of thirty come to write *A Country Doctor*, in Prague, during the First World War? Was he a physician himself? No, he wasn't. His doctorate was in law. But he did have a favourite uncle, Uncle Siegfried, who was indeed a country doctor and the young Franz spent some happy summer holidays staying with Uncle Siegfried and no doubt hearing stories about his patients. One can imagine the doctor coming home from a visit, throwing his bag on the table and saying, 'well that was a complete waste of time!' In a more reflective mood he might have said to his nephew: 'what do these patients really want from me? Don't they understand that I can't work miracles? Believe me, my boy, writing prescriptions is easy, BUT...

At home in Prague, life was more difficult for the young Franz. He had a very problematic relationship with his father who was large noisy, self-confident man, very different from his shy, thin, nervous son. Kafka's father was a successful businessman who wanted a son who would be like himself. But all Franz wanted to do was to write and that his father could never understand. Knowing all this, we come back to the Country Doctor story and what do we see? We see a doctor and a patient. But we also see a frail young man, rather like Franz, and an overbearing older man, perhaps like Franz's father. Clearly they are having difficulty in understanding one another. And what about that terrible wound in the boy's side? Kafka died from tuberculosis which first revealed itself when he coughed up some blood. That was not till 1917, after the story

had been written, but when it happened Kafka wrote to a friend: 'I predicted that I would cough up blood in *A country doctor*'. But that wound has other meanings. Many critics have seized on its sexual symbolism: it has been likened to a vagina and its colour is described as rose-red, which reminds us of the girl Rose back at the doctor's house. We know that Kafka's relationships with women were difficult and complicated. He wrote hundreds of love letters but shied away from marriage because he felt that living with another person would prevent him from being able to write. Although deeply attached to his fiancée Felice, he seemed to be happier writing to her than being with her. He also had brief affairs with other women some of which made him feel good. After casual encounters he would come away feeling disgusted with himself. Only at the end of his life did he find an all too short happiness with a young woman called Dora. But even if that rose red wound is a symbol of sexuality it doesn't really explain why the young man says that the wound he was born with was the only thing of value that he brought into the world. Perhaps, as some critics have suggested, the wound also represents his gift as a writer: a source of joy but also of pain and ultimately perhaps of his premature death. And what of that famous sentence about prescriptions being easier than understanding? What does he mean by coming to an understanding with people? At the time he wrote the story, in the winter of 1916-17, he was agonising about understanding his relationship with Felice. Their engagement had been broken off but they were writing to each other again and even planning to meet. Kafka's haemoptysis in September 1917, 'the fatal wound' provided a good excuse for him to abandon any ideas of marriage because of his poor health.

Once you start thinking about Kafka's writing all sorts of levels of meaning start to reveal themselves. Some of them may contradict one another but that doesn't really matter. When I read this story I have the strange feeling that I have learned something important although I can't explain what it is or what it means. It's a bit like reading a mysteriously beautiful poem. The same thing can happen in a Balint group discussion. All sorts of different opinions are expressed. We often feel we have learned a lot but uncertainty remains. In reading and thinking about *A country doctor* we learn about a doctor and a patient and their relationship with each other as they exist in the mind of the author. We learn something about ourselves and about the human condition. Just like in a Balint group.