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The Tip of the Iceberg

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Like so many who have dealt with the mental health of patients, I have never been a psychiatrist but all those years ago decided to choose general practice as my path. Even if I am not a psychiatrist, nevertheless a great deal of a family doctor's work must take into account not only physical symptoms and signs but also the patient‘s background, mental state, and life events. When dealing with patients, it is useful to think of the iceberg where only 1/10th visible and the rest does not meet the eye.

Having been involved with the Balint movement since my GP training in London in the seventies, it has been my pleasure and privilege to lead Balint groups for GP trainees for over twenty years in Iceland. Having gone through medical school, the medical model is obviously at the core of young doctors‘ thinking but adding Balint at that stage is in my opinion paramount to be able to move outside the box and see and deal with the patient as a person. This may be a difficult path to follow for many reasons.

As a medical student I spent at least a month in the psychiatric hospital Kleppur in Reykjavík. The building was old, the wards mainly based in common rooms, adding a few private rooms for isolation, and medicines quite crude with numerous side effects. Some patients had electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) which probably was almost experimental but by this time the old method of ice cold baths alternating with hot water was outdated. Later, when I had in mind to specialise in anaesthetics, I attended the above mentioned ECTs, watching the convulsions with awe.

As a medical student one of my duties was clerking patients, which meant that a friendly connection was often made. I especially remember a young woman, more or less my age, whose life history and background were obviously to blame for her mental difficulties at the time. I spent a lot of time listening to her.

Another youngish woman walked up and down her ward in a sexual manner, swinging hips and moving her thighs in a way that mirrored her disturbed

thinking. There was a tendency to copy her gait on the way to have a coffee break – a bit sad and shameful when I think of it now.

Most surprising for me was to enter a ward with chronic patients, most of whom had been hospitalized for years and years. The forgotten people. One woman was hardly in any touch with her surroundings except the electric switches. These switches were on the middle of the walls, approximately at the height of her face and she spent her days wandering from one to the other, kissing each one as they were her boyfriends.

I worked as the assistant city medical officer in Reykjavík for a year, attending the scene of suicides and murders and attending arrested people in cells. One prisoner had been caught and imprisoned after throwing a large stone through the window of a doctor's sleeping accommodation in Kleppur. They had had a disagreement. I was sent to meet this guy, who paced up and down the interview room, the door ajar as a policeman was to sit outside which he alas did not. I was pregnant at the time and must say not at ease trying to assess this prisoner-patient.

So, as a GP dealing with my patients for almost forty years, sharing their sorrows and joys, is that psychiatry? I have often found psychiatric diagnoses like depression overused, especially when sorrow is the real reason and therefore antidepressants make no difference. Would you turn to psychotherapy or a GP who knows you?

One middle-aged lady in my practice, married with children, repeatedly presented with obscure physical complaints – 'a difficult patient' – but finally confided in me about an abusive father who had sexually molested her for years. She had never been able to reveal the fact to anyone before. After school she would sit on the steps outside the house in all kinds of weather waiting for her mother to come home rather than venture inside to dad. Stories like this one appear in literature again and again. A recent one I read is called *My Absolute Darling* by Gabriel Tallent. Make sure you read it.