



Watson, the game is a foot... or a palm

What common message do a 64-year-old woman with postoperative cognitive changes (page 690 in this issue of the *Journal*) and an 83-year-old man with red palms (page 666) have for us as physicians? As I read their clinical scenarios and the editorial by Westendorp (page 699), I was struck by the value and significance of informed clinical observation, an activity that I fear is going the way of the music CD and handwritten letters.

As I read the descriptions of these patients I was reminded of the internal satisfaction that I feel when I pick up a clinical or historical finding that directs me to a specific diagnosis and therapeutic recommendation. Sherlock Holmes I am not. Those satisfying pickups are infrequent, and I have no idea how many clues I have missed. I do know that most come from taking the time to perform a methodical physical examination, directed and informed by the patient's recounted history. Some, like red palms or anisocoria, may be readily apparent and diagnostically useful—if the observer recognizes their potential significance. The 2 patients described in this issue of the *Journal* highlight the value of both observation *and* the knowledge and experience to place what we observe into a clinical context. Watson (the computer) can provide data regarding the potential significance of a physical finding, but only if someone first detects its existence.

Once it is recognized (or pointed out), we can all pull out our smartphones and Google “palmar erythema and disease,” and on our screen up pops liver disease, pregnancy, and assorted other conditions, including malignancies. But how many of us in our clinic, as opposed to the artificial scenario of reading it in the *Journal* or attending a clinicopathologic conference, will spontaneously recognize palmar erythema as a potentially relevant clinical finding?

For many physicians, the sense of professional satisfaction in making these observations is diminished. The professional joy gleaned from these moments has been diluted. We are in jeopardy of losing the passion for the professional work that we do as well as the intellectual and emotional satisfaction that accompanies a nuanced professional job well done, while focusing instead on our contracted jobs, frequently evaluated by our ability to meet commercial needs. The absence of emotional and intellectual satisfaction that should come from these collected moments of patient interaction and reflection undoubtedly contributes to the rising rate of physician burnout.

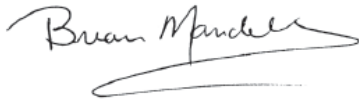
There are so many pressures on us in the office. Did I record that my new patient with known rheumatoid arthritis (who has had a recent MI and pneumonia and who has tried several biologic therapies without success and is in need of a creative change in her medication) has a cousin with hypothyroidism so I could include family history in my electronic medical record note and thus bill at a “desired” level of complexity? Did I use the appropriate catchphrase stating that over 50% of my time was spent in

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education of the patient (after collecting and reading for 30 minutes the stack of prior records, preparing to do battle with her insurance company to get the next therapy approved for coverage)?

There is little wonder that an observation of red palms gets missed or, if it is noted, that the Google search is never actually done. And when we do recognize the finding and its clinical significance, we often don't take a moment to reflect and bask in the glow of a job well done, the satisfaction of successfully applying both our knowledge and experience to help resolve a clinical problem.

As Westendorp points out, bedside observation is still relevant. And I will add that there still should be joy in the intellectual pursuit of the job well done as well as the patient well managed. It takes more than a smartphone to know when and how to look at the palms and the eyes before typing in a Google search or consulting the digital (not the doctor) Watson. Those are skills to be proud of.



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