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How to Study Your Doctor

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If I wanted to find out what a new doctor was like, I wouldn't ask their colleagues.¹ I'd go and talk to their patients. Or, better still, I would start a Balint group made up of patients who would be invited to present their doctors. I have not so far managed to start such a group but, many years ago (Salinsky 1989) I did write a paper about a fictitious Balint group for patients. I read the paper to a meeting of French and British doctors, and one of my colleagues provided a simultaneous French translation. The English title was *Did I talk too much? A Balint group for Patients*.

Most of the audience seemed to see the joke but there was a sizeable minority who weren't sure and were heard to ask each other, '*C'est une blague, n'est ce pas?*'.

It is my view that in order to discover what is really going on in the patient-doctor relationship we need to start Patient Balint Groups (PBGs) where patients can go to discuss their doctor-patient relationship. Has this ever been done before? Michael Balint and colleagues wrote a book called *A Study of Doctors* (Balint, M. et al, 1996) but it was all about doctors assessing other doctors. No one asked what their patients thought.

Earlier on, there was a wonderful book called *Doctors Talking to Patients* by Patrick Byrne and Barrie Long (1989) which consisted of live recordings. The private conversations between doctor and patient were transcribed for all GPs to read. Most of them made me feel embarrassed for my colleagues; although, I have to say that some were very funny. Yet a small minority of the doctors actually listened to their patients respectfully; and could truthfully be said to use a 'counselling mode' in which the patient did most of the talking.

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So where do we go from here? My suggestion is that several of our senior Society members should set up a new Balint Research group. They will engage a professional ethnographer who will interview a sample of patients who have been presented to the group. This has been done with trainee GPs but not the patients themselves (Pinder et al 2006). When the report is eventually written we shall, at last, be able to read what is really going on, at both conscious and unconscious levels, in the hallowed privacy of the Consultation.

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