## from the Editor's desk

## **EXTINGUISHING EMPATHY**

Search any dictionary for "pathography" and the word will not be found with "pathogen", "pathogenesis" or "pathology". But pathography has become a tool in medical education. Its roots are pathos ("suffering") and graphe ("writing"), and refers to stories which explore the emotions and suffering of those who are ill. Such poignant, personal passages are now used in medical training to promote compassion and empathy.

For most of the last century the ideal in medicine was Osler's aequanimitas — described by the US academic and author Melvin Konner as "poise in the face of a crisis, grace under pressure". However, some claim aequanimitas encourages clinical distance and dispassionate care. Moreover, the hold of technology and diagnostic disciplines on modern medicine has spawned the image of doctors as distanced and passionless.

But medical training has begun to take up the challenge and now stresses the value of listening to, feeling for and identifying with patients — in short, empathy — an emotion that the US physician Howard Spiro so evocatively captures as "when 'I and you' becomes 'I am you', or at least 'I might be you'."

Students at the start of their medical journey are fired with enthusiasm and empathy.

But the crowded curriculum's emphasis on bioscience, the pathology of disease and accuracy of diagnosis detached from patient care does little to encourage empathy. Students soon learn detachment and equanimity.

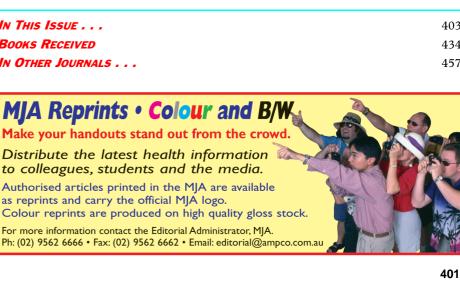
After graduation, empathy is further drained by the dark and demanding side of humanity, and detachment becomes the essence of survival.

But, more importantly, empathy requires time for conversation and connecting.

As long as medicine's most scarce commodity is time, the embers of empathy that once fired the student will be extinguished. And doctors will remain distanced and passionless.

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LETTERS	
Corticosteroid-induced scleroderma renal crisis Anita T Y Lee, Simon P Burnet	459
Should we still give our asthmatic patients written individualised management plans?	
Andrew M Thornett, Jonathan W Newbury, Andre J Duszynski Peter G Gibson	459 460
Death and paramethoxyamphetamine — an evolving problem	
Werner Jacobs	460
Hospital locums: expensive and problematic Elizabeth Swinburn	460
Cosmetic surgery Darryl J Hodgkinson	461
RARE SALAMI trial revisited	
Helge H Rasmussen, Peter S Hansen, Gregory I C Nelson Michael C Kennedy	462 462
Continuity of care in general practice	
Peter C Arnold	463
More favourite books C Ross Philpot	463
Recommendations for lightning protection in sport	
David G Vivian Michael Makdissi	463 464
Michael Gullquist	464
BOOK REVIEW	
Hepatitis C, other liver disorders and liver health. A practical guiden reviewed by Katrina J R Watson, Colleen Vaughan, Robert Benson	e 422
OBITUARIES	
Joseph Correy by Gerard Gartlan	439
Peter John Ryan	451
by Brian T Collopy	401
SNAPSHOT	
Halloween CT cholangiogram Andrew D Wills	461
IN THIS ISSUE	403
BOOKS RECEIVED	434
IN OTHER JOURNALS	457
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MJA Vol 177 21 October 2002