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Scope of the Scope

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Scope of the Scope

Benjamin Cox

The stethoscope is an important medical instrument, but it is also a symbol that holds a variety of meanings for different groups of people. The patient sees the stethoscope around an individual's neck and instantly recognizes that individual as a healthcare provider. The doctor visualizes the stethoscope as an important piece of diagnostic equipment. The young medical student visualizes the stethoscope as a symbol of pride and acceptance into the healthcare community. An experience on Bellevue's inpatient pediatric floor taught me that while my stethoscope certainly functions as an identifier and a tool, it can also be used as a powering teaching instrument.

One of my patients on the pediatrics floor was an energetic, adorable little kid who had been admitted to the hospital after a severe asthma attack landed him in the ER. While talking to his parents, I learned that he had previously been taking an asthma controller medication every day, but when the prescription ran out, his parents did not get a refill because "he seemed perfectly healthy." I know that asthma is a chronic inflammatory process that is occurring inside the little guy's body even if he looks fine on the outside, but the parents clearly did not.

Once I was able to get the youngster to stop running around the room long enough to perform a physical exam, my suspicions were confirmed. I put my stethoscope against the patient's back and heard the wheezes in his lungs with textbook clarity. The smiling kid playfully broke away and ran back over to his mom; as she hugged him, she gave me a look that said "See doc!?! I told you he's a happy, healthy kid!"

In a flash of inspiration, I asked the mom if she wanted to have a listen to her son's lungs. She looked at me dubiously, but then proceeded to take my stethoscope from my outstretched hand. As I put the diaphragm of the stethoscope against her son's back in just the right spot, I vocalized the high-pitched whistling sound that she should listen for in a way that made the little patient giggle. Curiously, the mother put the eartips in her ears and as she listened, I saw a light bulb turn on in her head that was so bright that I'm sure that it could have been seen from Brooklyn. The mother finally understood that there was something really serious happening within her son's lungs even though he outwardly appeared healthy.

No doubt, some previous doctor had heard the same wheezes that I did and had come to the same diagnosis and treatment plan that I had. However, it seems that he or she had failed to explain to the parents *what* was going on inside their son's body, *why* their treatment plan was important, and *how* the medicines worked to keep their son healthy. Without this information, the parents were unable to truly become empowered and to take ownership of their son's healthcare.

The word "doctor" originates from the latin word *doctoris* which means "teacher." I think that a flaw of the fast-paced nature of clinical medicine is that it can cause students and doctors alike to lose sight of the true meaning of this title. At times, we operate solely as care-giving machines that generate diagnoses and come up with treatment plans. We use our shiny stethoscopes and deft maneuvers to get access to information that is hidden within the patient – information that only we know how to obtain and interpret.

This particular experience taught me that as a healthcare provider, it is in my best interest to get down off my high-horse and really take the time to share some of this information with my patients. The information I derive from my interview and physical exam allows *me* to get a deeper understanding of the disease process and guides *my* development of a diagnosis and treatment plan; though I have

found that it is just as important to share this information it with its owner and allow *the patient* to get a deeper understanding of their own body and empower *them* to take control and manage their diagnosis and treatment plan.

When I first got my stethoscope, I saw it as a symbol that I was a bona fide member of the healthcare community. I draped it around my neck and it made me feel like a doctor. Now I have a better idea about what that really means. When patients see my 'scope around my neck and call me "doctor," I quickly correct them and tell them that I'm only a student doctor, but silently I smile to myself and bask in the glory of that title. I do like to think of myself as a doctor – that is to say, a healthcare provider *and* a teacher.



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