

Letter to the editor

Failing health

Dr Farham is to be congratulated on her editorial comment on the deterioration of the quality of health care offered to South Africans, both in the public and private sectors. She is correct in stating that the lack of caring attitudes among medical and nursing staff comes down to 'one factor – the increasing emphasis on material wealth that has become the hallmark of our globalised world'.¹

I suggest that this comes from the atheist/humanist world view we have adopted as our construct of reality in education and public debate. When there is no good and righteous Creator to whom we are responsible, when we view ourselves as little more than highly evolved mammals, ethical injunctions to love our neighbours as we love ourselves carry little weight. Looking after number one too easily becomes the unthinking ethic we embrace. That will very quickly express itself in the pursuit of wealth and the 'good life'. People will defend this view quite vigorously, even though they will all acknowledge, when pressed, that such values cannot serve the common good.

It is time for us to do some searching again for the ancient ways on which the ethical attitudes of medical practice have been built over the centuries. They got their first foundations from Greek classical thought with its notions of virtue and the common good. Then they received a huge boost from the Judeo-Christian world view with its notions of mercy, the protection of the rights of the weak, and the call to sacrificial service. Out of that great tradition came the values which informed the nursing movement that Florence Nightingale established and the wonderful ethos of medical care in the latter part of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. Those values were a firmly held consensus until the melt-down in ethics that began in the 1960s and has gained such momentum since.

How do we return to an ethos of self-sacrifice and humility in service in our profession? It will not help to constantly claim that we are short staffed and overwhelmed by our epidemics of violence and AIDS, or that our remuneration is inadequate and our working conditions are miserable. We could say all that of

the situations people such as Drs Reg and Catherine Hamlin encountered in Ethiopia and which they successfully coped with in order to open and run the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital.² Reference 3 is an example of all those who achieved so much when our own mission and teaching hospitals were established in the RSA. I know of no other way than a return to a biblical world view because that alone gives a firm enough basis for mercy, gentleness and selflessness in the midst of stress and suffering.

J V LARSEN

181 Amberfield
Private Bag X010
Howick
3290

1. Farham B. Failing health. *CME* 2007; 25; 461.
2. Hamlin C. *The Hospital by the River*. Sydney: Macmillan, 2001.
3. Adams B. *Anthony and Maggie Barker: Lives in Tandem*. Suffolk: Adams, 1996.

Single suture

Gene variant may influence how people learn from their mistakes

Some people are slow to learn from bad experience. Now Tilmann Klein and colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany have found that people with a particular variant of a gene may have more difficulty than normal learning via negative reinforcement. The research centres on the A1 allele of the gene encoding the D2 receptor, a protein on the surface of brain cells that affects the neurotransmitter dopamine. Earlier studies have suggested that this variant alters the brain's receptor pathways and can make people more vulnerable to addictions. The D2 receptor is critical for reward and many other behaviours.

In this study, Klein and colleagues carried out function magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) on 26 healthy German men who looked at 3 pairs of Chinese ideograms, determining which pair was the 'good' symbol. Men with the A1 alleles showed less activity in the areas of the brain associated with negative feedback monitoring and memory than did controls. The authors suggest that this system could be related to impaired reward systems in addicts. However, others are sceptical about whether a single base pair difference in the genome can have such wide ranging effects.

Science 2007; 318: 1539.