

Dilemma of Diagnosis!

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What is your diagnosis, Doctor?

That is a question frequently encountered when a medical student faces the examination. Also that question haunts every medical person while treating a person or in the courts facing cross examination.

As a student, the knowledge and clinical skills are tested along with reasoning, in relation to the background of a given subject or scenario. The student has to prepare for different types of examination pattern right from case discussion to spot the diagnosis.

As a medical practitioner, much more important is your experience, when you have to give a palatable or acceptable reasoning & treatment option for a patient, keeping your safety, in the era of consumer protection act. Some times a treatable diagnosis is entertained at the top of the list when multiple differential diagnosis are considered.

Medicine is a science but practicing Medicine is an art which cannot be governed by the basic tenets of logic or evidence based Medicine. Vast information is available in published and open sources, all of this may not be accurate & reliable. It is expected that professional advice should be unambiguous because ambiguity leads to different interpretations. Evidence based medicine, although more applicable to scientific studies can also be used to decide management of individual subject with a word of caution, that management of individual case should be tailored depending on multiple factors.

Some times diagnosis is made on intuition (which depends upon the knowledge & experience as eyes can see what the mind knows) and rare diagnosis is seen rarely because common diagnosis is entertained commonly.

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The expert opinion given in a particular case depends on the standard textbook reference and mostly does not take into consideration of the prevailing circumstances, facilities available, qualification and experience of the treating medical professional, available financial resources , etc. The textbook description needs to be applied for ideal conditions which are different from realistic situations. Hence decision of negligence and professional lapses needs to be considered in particular case scenario before deciding a litigation.

As an expert, in the courts you have to justify the inference and investigation done along with the treatment given to a particular patient. In legal matters documentation is important in every case attended.

The population at large needs to be emphasised about some thing called as “Diagnosis by Exclusion “ also exists in practice. In the South Asian countries Tuberculosis treatment is initiated some times as a diagnosis of exclusion.

You cannot dictate the presentation patterns, behaviour & course of diseases. These depend upon various factors, like pathogenicity of organisms, immunity of individual, effectiveness of drugs, response of individual to treatment, etc. It is also difficult to predict the side effects or adverse effects of drugs. Textbook descriptions are a guide to the approach and management of disorders.

Medicine is an ever changing branch with newer & recent advances adding to the uncertainties & probabilities. The treatment modality considered best today becomes obsolete and absurd in future. Medical science is like an ocean with mysteries yet not solved and many questions still remain unanswered.

“Medicine is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability “ - William Osler.

Now It becomes mandatory to state that diagnosis is a “Hypothesis “ that needs to be proved or disproved

after clinical examination, correlation of appropriate investigations and some times medicines are used as therapeutic trials.

There is a glamorous perception about the world of doctors. The purpose of getting a subject investigated is to ensure that both the physician & patient face no surprises; while the information collected helps in making informed decisions. Most

of this decision making & analyses are now available in books & internet. Even a second opinion can also be sought. The depth of knowledge & skills vary in different personalities. Although machines and gadgets are an aid, these cannot substitute human intelligence. Hence the society needs to understand the difficulties while making & accepting “The Diagnosis “.