

*‘Everywhere one looks in  
the academy these days,  
theory is out and stories  
are in.’*

# The Significance of Narrative Variety in Depictions of Bioethical Problems

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‘case reports should begin with giving an account of the condition of the patient, independently of the disease, briefly mentioning age, sex, temperament, condition of life and other circumstances...’

*Andrew Duncan Medical Cases ...from the Records of the Public Dispensary at Edinburgh 1781.*

Our first moments with a patient are packed with visual, auditory, tactile and sometimes olfactory information... Of all the diagnoses that ever will be made, most are made during the history... Even when patients are referred to specialist centres... attention is appropriately refocused on the key clinical enactment: the patient's 'story' and the physical examination.

David Sackett. *Oxford Textbook of Medicine* 1996,15.

‘We have a patient who came for a prostatectomy, ...as he was getting prepped, the nurses noticed that he wouldn’t talk about his family. Really odd. Then, after surgery, he tells us that his wife and children – even his secretary – all think he’s away on a business trip, and he doesn’t want us to contact them. Now the patient – and they name him - is bleeding, and we just took him back to the operating theatre’.

Chambers T, Montgomery K. Plot: framing contingency and choice in bioethics. In: Charon R and Montello M. (eds) *Stories matter*. New York Routledge 2002

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A man learns he needs surgery

He tells his family he is away on a business trip

After the surgery he tells the health care professionals about the deception

He suffers a bleeding complication of surgery and is taken back to theatre.

A man learns he needs surgery **A patient** underwent a **prostatectomy**

He tells his family he is away on a business trip **In fact (at some point) before the operation the nurses noticed that he would not discuss his family**

After the surgery he tells the health care professionals about the deception **After the operation, he confesses he's kept the need for surgery a secret**

He suffers a bleeding complication of surgery and is taken back to theatre. **As he is being taken back to theatre (bleeding) he requests/?demands his carers make no contact with his family or business associates.**

# Case report

The foot of Aristion's female slave spontaneously ulcerated in the middle of the foot on the inner side. The bones became corrupted, separated and came off little by little, eroded. Diarrhoea developed; she died.

Hippocrates. Epidemics V in Smith WD (Tr) Epidemics II and IV-VII. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994,185.

# Case report

In Larisa a bald man suddenly experienced pain in the right thigh. No remedy did any good.

*First day.* Acute fever of the ardent type; the patient was quiet, but the pains persisted.

*Second day.* The pains in the thigh subsided, but the fever grew worse; the patient was rather uncomfortable and did not sleep; extremities cold; copious unfavourable urine was passed.

*Third day.* The pain in the thigh ceased, but there was derangement of the intellect, with distress and much tossing.

*Fourth day.* Death about mid-day.

Hippocrates. Epidemics III in Jones WH (Tr). *Hippocrates*. London: W Heinemen Ltd and Cambridge, Harvard U. Press 1972, 144.

# Case report

The pretty young virgin daughter of Nerius was twenty years old. She was struck on the bregma by the flat of the hand of a young woman friend in play. ... she became blind and breathless, and went home when fever seized her... her head ached, and there was redness about the face. On the seventh day foul smelling pus came out around the right ear, reddish ...she was prostrated, depressed, speechless; the right side of her face was drawn up. On the ninth day she died.

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# Case report

I was called in to see a woman who was stated to be sleepless at night and to lie tossing about from one position into another. Finding she had no fever I made a detailed enquiry into everything that had happened to her, especially considering such factors as we know to cause insomnia. But she either answered little or nothing at all, as if to show it was useless to question her. Finally she turned away, hiding herself completely by throwing the bedclothes over her whole body, and laying her head on another pillow, as if desiring to sleep...

Galen *On Prognosis*. Brock AJ (Tr) Greek Medicine. London 1929, 213.



# Account of an unusual Medical Case

I was surpriz'd yesterday with a very extraordinary case...Madam R –'s Girl fell into violent Convulsion fits; and while she was in them voided a large quantity of Blood by the Mouth, the Nose, the Ears, and the Eyes... All these symptoms were over in half an hours time, and the young girl...was very well presently. I am apt to believe they are Epileptick Fits; but the sudden relief and cessation of them by bleeding through all these parts, I must confess is wonderful to me.

Monginot F. *Phil Trans Roy Soc* 1700-01, 756-8

## **A Girl, three Years old, who remained a quarter of an Hour under Water without drowning**

May 6 1737 Rebecca Yates of Billson near Market Bosworth in Leicestershire, had a Daughter about three Years of Age, that fell into the Mill dam at the Head, near to the Mill-Wheel; and by force of the stream, was drawn under the water to said Wheel, with her legs forwards; one of her legs went under the Mill-Wheel; and by reason of Nearness of the Wheel...the Child's leg stopped the said Wheel from moving at all. The sudden stopping of the Mill so much surprised the Miller that he went immediately and let down the shuttle.....

The First Word she spoke was Help me, repeating this three times. For God's sake help me out if you can. She spoke very briskly after she was put to bed...But the Mill Wheel had tore away all Skin, Muscles, Sinews and Tendon of her leg quite to the Bone.

Child lived Monday to Friday then died of her wounds and bruises; otherwise in all Appearance, she might have lived to have made a fine Woman. The whole Time of her being under Water depth 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> feet was near 15 minutes.

Green J. *Philosophical Transactions* 1739 (July-Oct) 166-8.



# The case of the forgotten address

A 39-year-old right-handed community nurse presented to us on the neurology ward in April, 2005. She had appeared subdued before starting the afternoon shift and when asked she could not recall her home address. The nurse's symptoms had begun 48 hours previously, when she woke with a bitemporal headache. Her vision then “flipped 180°” so that all images appeared inverted...

Samarasekera S, Dorman P. The case of the forgotten address.

*Lancet* 2006;367:1290

# Hilda Thompson

The day before I wrote this paper I saw a patient, whom I will call Hilda Thomson, during a morning surgery at a village health centre. She was new to the district, having moved into the village about 3 months ago. She was in late middle age, a large, rather untidy woman with an angry looking face. It was clear she did not have very high hopes of the consultation. She told me that she had increasingly severe pains in her arms and legs, and that these had been made infinitely worse by a visit to an osteopath in the city. Her only reason for visiting him, she said, was the signal failure of doctors to help her in the past.

Some years ago she had been diagnosed as suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. In support of this story she produced from a canvass bag some eight or nine remedies for this condition and, of course, by way of an hors d'oeuvre and a dessert, a selection of choice psychotropic drugs and a sleeping tablet. The pain had been made much worse by her move to the village.

Three years ago, she and her husband had bought a grocery shop in the nearest town and had commuted about 30 miles from their previous home. A year ago her husband, Peter, who had previously taken a large part of the burden of the shop, had had a coronary thrombosis.

Since then he had become a complete invalid, demanding constant attention, refusing to venture beyond the garden gate, and taking no part at all in the running of the business. She had been taking the sleeping tablet for 3 years, but habitually woke in the small hours of the morning. Three years ago blood tests had suggested the diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis.

Inspection of her joints now revealed little evidence of the disease, although her eyes filled with tears when I began to examine her. She told me that the Government was unfair to small shopkeepers and that nobody in society cared about the “little man”.