

Against the Odds

- 1 Take a minute to reflect on the following question and compare your thoughts with a partner.

What does the act of touch mean to you – as a child, adult patient, (student) doctor?

- 2 a Before you read, look at these extracts from the text. Discuss your initial thoughts on these with a partner.

- 1 *'My happiest moments with her during these months are spent in silence, simply holding hands.'*
- 2 *'These days we may be more inclined to view the restorative power of touch in psychological rather than directly physical terms, but it remains a potent force.'*
- 3 *'But ever since Rene Laennec invented the stethoscope in 1816, contact has become increasingly removed.'*
- 4 *'As he places his hands on my head, I feel an intense, warm glow passing between them and my scalp.'*

- b Read this patient's account, noting points related to the extracts (1–4) above and compare your thoughts with the class.

Against the Odds

Shadows in Wonderland: A Hospital Odyssey by Colin Ludlow tells of his experience and that of his wife, Anna, as they both struggle through treatment for bowel cancer.

... I have recently been admitted to Intensive Care, and I am feeling fretful, feverish and frightened. It is evening, I think, and I ask for Anna to be called to come and sit with me for comfort. This is the only time I make such a request, but the message never reaches her, and I remain alone. So I ask the nurses if they will hold my hand. Just for a few minutes to calm and settle me. They are tremendously caring. They tenderly manoeuvre me to change my sweaty sheets, or patiently prepare cold compresses for my burning forehead. But this request seems to embarrass them. 'When I've finished this,' or 'When I've done that,' they reply. I have no recollection of whether they do.

Throughout my stay in hospital, but at this time in particular, my mother's visits are difficult for me. She is in the early stages of dementia, so although she can still function relatively normally, her short-term memory is poor and she repeatedly says the same things. For me, in my severely weakened condition, it is more than I have the strength to bear. Nevertheless, what my mother still understands with undimmed maternal instinct is the comfort of being touched when you are distressed and vulnerable. My happiest moments with her during these months are spent in silence, simply holding hands.

The healing power of touch has a potent and well-attested history that goes back far further than the fear of hospitals. It has, of course, biblical manifestations and significance. The sick with 'divers diseases' were brought to Jesus, 'and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them'. These days we may be more inclined to view the restorative power of touch in psychological rather than directly physical terms, but it remains a potent force. Princess Diana made a palpable difference to the lives of many Aids patients by holding hands with one of them, and having her photograph taken while she did so.

Traditionally, the heart of any doctor's consultation was a manual examination. He touched his patient as part of the process of diagnosing. But ever since Rene Laennec invented the stethoscope in 1816, contact has become increasingly removed. If he ventures out from behind his computer to touch the patient, it will be with hands encased in sterile gloves. He may even don a plastic apron as well.

While recuperating after surgery, I receive a visit from one of the hospital chaplains. The priest asks whether I'd like him to 'lay hands' on me while he says a prayer. I feel I have nothing to lose and so accept the offer - and find what follows a truly extraordinary experience. As he places his hands on my head, I feel an intense, warm glow passing between them and my scalp. I pay no attention to what he is saying because I am transfixed by the energy being transmitted through his palms. The sensation lasts no more than a few seconds, and I am not instantly cured - rather the opposite, if anything, since the effects of my illness still dog me to this day. However, the experience itself remains vividly memorable and continues to seem rather wonderful.

I do not wish to suggest that hospital staff should all be laying on hands or indulging in empty rituals of sensual healing. But being touched is a way in which our humanity is affirmed, in which our connectedness is, quite literally, made manifest to us. These are vital aspects of our sense of wellbeing. It is surely not a matter of mere chance that alternative therapies are currently enjoying a surge in popularity, and that so many of these involve touching the patient. Reflexology, kinesiology, aromatherapy and other forms of healing massage, cranial osteopathy, even Reiki all entail physical contact with the therapist. One of very few good memories I have from my time in ITU is of being visited by Keith, the hospital complementary therapies co-ordinator. For 10 blissful minutes, I temporarily forgot my pain and distress while he gently massaged my feet and calves. It was a marvellously soothing and comforting sensation...

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3 With a partner, answer the questions.

- 1 Why do *you* think the nurses were reluctant to carry out the patient's request to hold his hand?
- 2 What does the patient mean when he says '*being touched is a way in which our humanity is affirmed*'?

4 In small groups, discuss the following question.

What role might alternative therapies play in the treatment of patients, particularly those suffering from a terminal illness?