

Verbal cues

- 1 To what extent do you think it is necessary for a doctor to go beyond the visible symptoms ?
- 2 What was the crucial statement in this passage?

A crucial statement

One day in early spring Mrs S, a longstanding and familiar patient in the clinic, consulted for cat bites, which had occurred that same morning. She told me that, without any warning, the cat had jumped on her, scratched her, and bitten her in the arm.

She looked quite bewildered, and when I checked her I noticed that on her right arm she had several deep scratches and numerous bite wounds. It was as if the cat had gone berserk. Knowing that cat wounds can be very deep, I prescribed an antibiotic and sent her home. At the same time, I mentioned that it might be better to get rid of such a ferocious cat, to which she nodded affirmatively.

When she returned three days later I noticed that the wounds were not looking any better, and I changed the treatment. I asked her if she had got rid of the cat, to which she replied, "Not yet." And then she started to explain that it had all been her fault anyway: On the day she'd been bitten, a female cat in heat had been howling in the courtyard, and her own cat had got very excited. Wound up by sexual frustration, he had jumped on her when she entered the room.

Gradually her arm got better, and whenever she visited me I would ask if she had got rid of the cat. Yet she would reply, "No, I love him. I just can't get rid of him. He is always so good to me; He has never hurt me. It is not his fault. In fact, it was my fault entirely. If I hadn't disturbed him, he'd never have jumped on me. This is the first time that such a thing has happened, and I'm sure he'll never do it again. He is such a good cat."

To me, her words seemed very strange in the light of the trauma that she had experienced when she first consulted me about the wounds. I said to her: "You know, you relate to this crazy cat exactly as battered women relate to their partners. You use the same words, you express the same guilt feelings, and you're still convinced you love him and believe that he'll never hurt you again."

She then looked at me with a look that was indecipherable.

The next visit was much sooner than expected. She walked into my room, closed the door, sat down, and said, "You know, doctor, when my husband hits me it hurts less than the wounds inflicted by my cat."

BMJ 2002;325:900 (19 October)

- 3 The doctor says "it was as if the cat had gone berserk". If he wanted to find out more about how the wounds on the patient's arm were made, do you think he would have been better to use an open or closed question? Create a question the doctor could have used in this context.
- 4 In comparing Mrs S' relationship with the cat to that of battered women and their partners, the doctor uses objective language. What do you think are the benefits of using objective language in a situation like this?