

Ward rounds: what goes around comes around

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Long before evidence-based medicine—long before treatments that worked reliably, in fact—people needed doctors. What for, if not to provide a perfectly designed medical or surgical intervention as part of a well-honed treatment pathway? One answer lies in a painting by the Victorian artist Sir Luke Fildes, *The Doctor*, in which a physician watches carefully over a sick child. The story behind it is instructive: Fildes produced the picture in memory of the death of his son some years previously. As one of Fildes' other sons, Luke Val, recorded in his biography of his father, “The character and bearing of their doctor throughout the time of their anxiety made a deep impression on my parents”. In other words, although the doctor could not save the life of Fildes' child, the gift of his time and concern was an important therapeutic intervention in itself. Ward rounds in medicine, the guidance document by the UK's Royal College of Physicians (RCP) and the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) released on Oct 4, 2012, makes much the same point, if rather less artfully: “Healthcare professionals should not underestimate the importance of interactions on the ward round from the patient's perspective”. The importance of communication between medical professionals and their patients is underlined by figures released by the UK General Medical Council (GMC) in September, 2012, showing that complaints to the GMC about doctors increased from 7153 in 2010 to a record high of 8781 in 2011. Among the top three complaints made by patients against their doctors were allegations of poor communication and a lack of respect, which increased by 69% and 45%, respectively, from 2010 to 2011. While GMC Chief Executive Niall Dickson stated that he did not believe these rising complaint figures resulted from falling clinical standards, one take-home message from the statistics might be this: if you do not communicate with your patient clearly, and do not treat your patient in a dignified manner, you are not providing even the bare minimum of health care.