

JUST VISITING DR. ABRAHAM VERGHESE

Medical professor cries out for better bedside manner

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Reading Dr. Abraham Verghese's first novel *Cutting for Stone*, with its descriptions of doctors caring for patients, it's no surprise the author is considered a master clinician who treats bedside diagnosis like an art best performed by the hands, eyes and ears.

Before he arrived in Toronto to promote his book, the *Star* spoke to the Stanford University medical professor about why technology has replaced bedside medicine in the United States, but not in Canada.

Q: You have written extensively about how, in America, the patient is often ignored in favour of information in a computer. Why?

A: The great danger is that we take committed, altruistic doctors and change them from having a people orientation to a disease orientation. When students in training first see the shocking and ghastly things that you see on the ward, they reflexively transform from a pre-cynical to a cynical stage. If you come to a ... hospital after losing a finger, no one will believe you until you have had an X-ray and CT scan.

Q: Why the reliance on technology?

A: There are forces that are pushing in that direction – you are paid for doing, for procedures, not for thinking and caring. That's what Medicare and Medicaid pay for. That type of reimbursement model is what drug companies and other medical companies want. But with the costs spiralling and the (poor) economy now, proper bedside care, which is much cheaper, will be the option.

Q: Do you see doctor care already changing in the U.S.?

A: No, I don't, to be honest. ... I have seen patients sent for tests before they have even been talked to. There's an important place where Canada and the United States diverge. In Canada there's a great tradition of (doctors) being tested at the bedside, where in America they're tested by a multiple-choice exam. I took the Canadian (medical board) exam. The Canadian system won't certify you until you prove your mettle clinically. It's like licensing a pilot and no one ever watched them take off and land.

Q: How have patients reacted? A: When you have a situation where the patient bares their body and soul to a physician, if that physician does not touch the body with skill, they have lost a very important opportunity. I think patients are dissatisfied and are going in droves to people who will touch them – chiropractors, naturalists, holistic practitioners.

Q: Is part of the problem litigation, which forces doctors to arm themselves with test results and technical diagnoses?

A: I think defensive medicine is a cop-out. It's much easier to do that than spend time with the patient at the bedside using the fundamental skills of medicine.