

## To be good enough

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The concept of a “good enough” mother originated in 1953, and the principle of good enough (POGE) is successfully used in the business world, particularly in the very lucrative software industry. However, the concept of a good enough doctor or a good enough health care system has not gained popularity among the general public or the medical community. Most physicians aim for perfection while struggling to balance personal and professional lives, and most health care systems try to provide patients with the latest diagnostic and therapeutic interventions despite escalating costs and limited resources. This article discusses the origin, key features, and merits of the POGE. We believe that excellence in medicine can be achieved by ensuring results that are good enough rather than by aiming for perfection.

### An unrealistic ideal

Up at the crack of dawn and working long into the night, this heroine magically creates extra hours each day juggling kids, schedules, chores and career. Navigating jungles of toys and mountains of kiddie stuff she prepares tasty-yet-healthy snacks, tames dust bunnies and banishes stubborn stains. With an invisible third arm and a never ending pursuit of work/life balance she can help with a school project and answer an all-important business call while wrist deep in dirty diapers. Part teacher, part doctor, part chauffeur, part boss ... she's all SuperMom.<sup>1</sup>

This is the description of a new action figure, not a real person. That being said, many women and men in the modern world are trying to balance personal and professional lives and are feeling stressed about not being able to do everything perfectly. Fortunately (or unfortunately) the SuperDad action figure has not yet been created,<sup>2</sup> although they have created BossMan, MoneyMan, and GeekMan as male counterparts to the SuperMom toy<sup>3</sup>—not to mention pre-existing action heroes such as Superman, Batman, and Spiderman who save the world.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that most parents try to provide the best for their children, and many feel guilty when they are not able to do so. Aiming for perfection in both professional and personal lives appears to be the norm in modern society, and the concept of good enough is neither familiar nor entertained as something worthy of consideration.

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### A good enough mother

Dr Donald Winnicott was a pediatrician who introduced the “good enough mother” in 1953.<sup>4</sup> He took a softer approach than Freud in his views about the role of parents, which popularized his teachings. Dr Winnicott recognized the need for children to realize that

a mother is neither good nor bad nor the product of illusion, but is a separate and independent entity: The good-enough mother ... starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure. Her failure to adapt to every need of the child helps them adapt to external realities.<sup>4,5</sup>

Dr Winnicott's teachings boiled down to the fact that a good enough mother was better than the perfect mother.

### The principle of good enough

Could the ideas behind the good enough mother be adapted to other aspects of life? In general being good enough in everything you do is better than being outstanding in some areas and bad in others. It would not be wrong to surmise that good enough is the best one can do in any given situation to satisfy the requirements at hand. For example, if you invite someone home for lunch you need to provide food around noon. Serving simple sandwiches at lunchtime is good enough—and better than attempting to serve a 10-course meal at 7 PM and calling it lunch.

Choosing good enough over perfect is an old idea among software developers. The POGE or the good enough principle is a rule for software and systems design.<sup>6</sup> It favours quick-and-simple designs over elaborate systems designed by committees. Once the quick-and-simple design is created, it can evolve according to user requirements. Ethernet, Internet protocol, and the World Wide Web were developed based on the POGE.<sup>6,7</sup> More and more people in the business world seem to be embracing this principle, as evidenced by a recent newspaper article on creating a great POGE-based camcorder.<sup>8</sup>

The essence of good enough lies in the minds of practitioners, not their practices. It takes the real world into account and accepts that benefits always come with problems. The paradigm is one of improving while doing, learning from failure, coping with complexity, and adjusting to human foible.<sup>7</sup>

### Good enough doctors

The general public expects physicians to be perfect: doctors who can diagnose and treat any illness while being excellent citizens and great role models. The medical community tries to maintain this image of infallibility in a misplaced sense of “we owe it to our patients to be the best of the best.” However, all physicians have to make choices—no resources are unlimited. Rising health care costs, an aging society, an explosion of new medical information, the limitations of modern medicine, competing personal lives, and a universal time limit of 24 hours in a day provide reality checks for many physicians. Physicians should aim to be and train others to be good enough doctors instead of perfect ones.

Richard Smith explores the good enough concept in his address to medical students.<sup>9</sup>

Being a good enough mother is to be a good mother, whereas the attempt to be the best will guarantee that you won't be (indeed, you may be a highly damaging mother). Similarly, you should aim to be a good enough medical student and doctor. One of the curses of doctors is that they have such strong stereotypes. Doctors are upstanding, trustworthy, clever, strait-laced, conservative, authoritarian, inhibited, wealthy, right wing, and—often—dull. Many doctors are none of these things, but as a medical student you may feel a pressure to conform to the stereotype. Don't. A lifetime spent trying to be something you are not will destroy you.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of being good enough in family medicine has been explored in the recent past, but it does not seem to have gained awareness or popularity in the general medical community.<sup>10,11</sup>

### Excellence through good enough

We should not confuse good enough with merely good. To claim that any given thing is good enough is to agree with all of the following statements<sup>6,7</sup>:

- There are sufficient benefits.
- There are no critical problems.
- The benefits sufficiently outweigh the problems.
- In the present situation, and all things considered, further improvement would be more harmful than helpful.

Good enough is not mediocrity. It has to do with rational choices as opposed to compulsive behaviour. The good enough approach is a way to drive ongoing improvement and achieve excellence by progressively meeting, challenging, and raising our standards as opposed to driving toward an illusion of perfection. A best practices approach to any endeavour is to start with good enough and raise the bar to achieve excellence—because being an excellent doctor should not compromise a good enough personal life. 🌿

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