



Art of Family Medicine

Appreciating humour

Ian A. Cameron MD CCFP FCFP

The best definition of humour I know is: Humour may be defined as the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof. I think this is the best I know because I wrote it myself.

Stephen Leacock¹

I have a family physician friend who has mastered the art of successfully incorporating humour into his practice. This is a task that might be fraught with danger but can be rewarding and therapeutic.

One busy afternoon my friend's schedule included a new mother and her premature baby whom he had delivered a week earlier. The baby had been jaundiced and at discharge from the hospital had not regained her birth weight. The mother was anxious. In his other examination room the family practice nurse was getting an elderly woman ready for a pelvic examination. She too was anxious; one of her friends had a prolapsed uterus and she was worried that she might have one as well.

The doctor examined the baby. Her bilirubin level was normal and she had gained weight—all was well. The mother smiled. He asked the relieved mother if he could borrow her baby for a moment and she agreed.

He took the baby into the adjoining examination room. The geriatric patient was lying on the examination table under a drape with her feet up in stirrups. He sat on the stool at the end of the table and put the baby underneath the drape. Then he peered around the drape and said, "OK, everything looks fine. Now I want you to push."

"What?"

"Push."

She gave a mighty push, and the doctor said, "Congratulations! It's a baby girl," and showed her the baby.

The geriatric patient, who knew her doctor very well, laughed and, joining the spirit of the moment, responded, "I was hoping for a boy."

What's in a smile? A laugh? Why is something triumphant?

In this story the young mother smiled and the geriatric patient laughed. Humour scholars say a smile is a bonding mechanism and laughter is an expression of freedom and relief. The physiologic aspects of humour are exhilaration, relaxation, and healing.²

This whimsical scenario worked because the patients knew and trusted their doctor, the family practice nurse was well versed in stage managing office events, and the doctor was a master of the "incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof."³

You are the audience

A much safer form of humour in the office involves allowing the patient to use humour with the doctor being the audience.

I had a patient I will call *Greg*. His father had died in an accident when he was very young, and his formative years were spent in a remote mining village during the Great Depression. Many would consider this to be a bleak and unpromising start in life, yet in this environment he developed a wonderful sense of humour. Perhaps it was a coping mechanism, perhaps it was an inherited gift, or maybe it was a combination of these reasons plus lots of exposure to rural humour before the advent of television and the Internet. He became a skilled wordsmith and a storyteller, and he was very adept at the quick repartee. He used these gifts in a successful career and he maintained a lifelong attachment to his inspiration: the little mining village, which remained vibrant in his memory as it continued its relentless decline.

I always looked forward to his appointments, where the business of the office visit was interspersed with an anecdote here and a bon mot there.

During his retirement he took up swimming laps. He considered swimming laps the perfect combination of exercise and solitude, but as we all know perfection is never obtained and occasionally even in a swimming lane the realities of life have a habit of intruding.

Here is Greg's story.

"John is an acquaintance of mine. I think you might know him. He swims laps the same time I do and has the bad habit of changing lanes. You have seen the type on 3- or 4-lane highways, always flitting in and out of lanes, cutting you off, never content to cruise control to the next destination. Well, John was the swimming equivalent and he could disrupt your rhythm and burst your solitude bubble in a twinkling. It wouldn't be wrong to say he was a jet-ski in the swimming pool. The day in question I had just completed the halfway mark of my lap goal. Everything was perfect. Then I became aware of a presence behind me. A quick glance confirmed a lot of splash and bubbles. John was on my tail. Rather than experience the disruption of letting him try to pass me, I took evasive action, slipped under the lane marker, and continued swimming in the adjacent lane.

"Later in the dressing room John came up to me, slapped me on the back, and said, 'I hope I didn't chase you out of your lane this morning.'

"Not at all,' I said, 'I only go into that lane to pee.'"

You never know what is going to be disclosed in the office. John never came into Greg's lane again, and I continued to be an appreciative audience for Greg's stellar wit.

Keep your humour

Sigmund Freud had this to say about humour: "Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure-principle, which is strong enough to assert itself ... in the face of the adverse real circumstances."²

Nilsen's book on humour scholarship included the following explanation: "Type B personalities tend to displace their anger, anxiety, and hostility by using humor ... [and they] also tend to have a much lower incidence of heart attack."²

If you are worried about *Escherichia coli* in the swimming pool that Greg had used for swimming laps, remember what the English writer Charles Lamb once said: "The teller of a mirthful tale has latitude allowed him. We are content with less than absolute truth."⁴ 

Dr Cameron is a retired Professor of Family Medicine (Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS) in Sherbrooke, NS, and Section Editor for the Art of Family Medicine section of *Canadian Family Physician*.

Competing interests

None declared

References

1. Fitzhenry RI, editor. *Harper book of quotations*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 1993. p. 222.
2. Nilsen DLP. *Humor scholarship. A research bibliography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; 1993.
3. Leacock S. *Humor and humanity. An introduction to the study of humor*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company; 1938.
4. Fitzgerald P, editor. *The life, letters, and writings of Charles Lamb: vol III*. New York, NY: Cosimo, Inc; 2008.

— * * * —