

## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

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This image has very humorously conveyed what, in fact, has become a very serious problem in our medical profession especially in our part of the world. Although it is certainly a source of great pun but, more so, it happens to be an area of immense concern at the same time. It is an often witnessed practice among some doctors to receive a patient with an obvious diagnosis but instead of treating the patient instantly they resume to ordering a long battery of tests. Such practices of tedious and at times useless tests, more often than not, end up in disastrous consequences.

Firstly it adds to the psychological distress of the patient. We, as the fortunate and educated lot, need to take into consideration the lack of adequate understanding on account of a very constantly low literacy rate prevalent in our society. We have to deal with a population that mostly does not comprehend the complexities of most disease processes and are usually left subjective to their imagination which does more harm than good. In consequence when a doctor hands out a list of tests to a patient already in distress, what we have is a patient with a medical dilemma which he does not completely understand and his equally bewildered family members questioning the doctor, the disease and the tests with no relief in sight.

Secondly this practice also adds to the economic burden of the patient. We live in a country where more than two thirds of the population live below poverty line. We are also a country where the people of the state are not looked after by the government but instead have to obtain medical help out of their own pocket. Add to it the financial burden of transportation to a health facility, acquiring treatment for one's medical malady puts most people under immense economic constraints. A lot of patients genuinely requiring medical attention, many a times, do not make it to the hospital because of the preconceived notion that the doctor will furnish their request for medical aid with a list of tests instead of offering them instant relief.

Along with adding to the distress of the patient, the practice of ordering tests before offering treatment has led to a dual problem. On the one hand layman people are becoming certain that the number of tests equate the quality of treatment being offered. The more the tests, the better the treatment. On the other hand this practice encourages the ever increasing number of quack doctors who conceal their absolute lack of medical knowledge by ordering the same tests as some doctors do, since it eliminates the need for sound clinical knowledge. This makes it impossible for the common man to differentiate between a doctor and someone who is pretending to be one, adding to the already prevalent immense burden of disease.

This practice on behalf of the doctor also tends to put a question mark on the competency and clinical acumen of the physicians. It also brings in question the command a doctor has on his subject. In medical schools, doctors preach about the importance and benefits of acquiring a good history from the patients and when required their family members. Tests are supposed to be carried out to support one's probable diagnosis. However, in practice due to shortage of time or lack of interest in their profession, some of these doctors might end up paying more attention to the tests than the history. Besides the above mentioned reasons and their implications on the patients and on the reputation of doctors, there lies another reason why doctors in our part of the world resort to ordering numerous tests on the patient. Many of the doctors tend to receive commission from certain laboratories or in other cases own them. The number of tests advised in this case are translated into the amount of money in their own pockets, with less than no consideration for the patient's comfort and economic conditions.

It is time we addressed the elephant in the room and reformed our clinical practice guidelines to limit the number of tests per patient or advise only the most relevant and important tests required for diagnosis. Steps need to be taken that would make acquirement of medical assistance of any kind seem less of a financial and psychological burden on the

patient and his family. Quack doctors should be incarcerated or penalized to eliminate the scourge of fake doctors. It is also important that the empathic nature of the doctors' is rekindled every now and then, for the constant tedium of never ending patients amidst exhausting schedules tends to dampen it.