



Clare Cooper thinks about the doctor-patient relationship

Service with authority

‘Well, I don’t know. You’re the doctor!’ I’ve heard this response from time to time in the consulting room. Efforts to involve the patient in decision making are not always understood or appreciated. At times patients want to leave everything in the doctor’s hands. At other times it seems that they are customers demanding a shopkeeper’s attention: ‘I know what I want and I want it now!’ so what is the doctor’s role? Clearly we cannot accede to every request. Neither can we impose treatment without consent. Between these two extremes lies a role with two components: to deliver a professional opinion and to be a servant of each patient.

Christian doctors may feel more comfortable with the servant role than their secular colleagues. After all, we follow the example of the Lord Jesus who came to serve and not to lord it over the people, even though he is the Son of God. We are accustomed to seeking – if not attaining – a servant attitude in all areas of our Christian life: at home, at work, in our church and community. We live amongst other believers who also endeavor to follow Christ’s

example of servanthood and whether we realise it or not this encourages us to ‘walk humbly with our God’ (Micah 6:8).

What of the doctor – patient relationship? Some patients irritate the best of us, making it even more difficult to approach them with a servant attitude. Yet we also have to fulfil our roles as professional opinion givers. There is both challenge and satisfaction in balancing these two aspects. The doctor cannot be merely a servant. The doctor must also be the professional who makes decisions, guides and informs, counsels and comforts.

Jesus taught us to go the extra mile to meet a need and to treat others with respect. Yet, as he demonstrated the servant role, the authority of his presence astonished people. Jesus had a heart of service and spoke with a voice of authority. We can do no better than to follow his example.

Clare Cooper is a former associate specialist in dermatology, now working for CMF