

The King's Speech

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A slew of well-deserved Oscars has further enhanced the reputation of the excellent film, *The King's Speech*. For those working in healthcare, there are added attractions to this movie which make it a useful addition to Medical Humanities programmes. At the heart of high quality art works (and usually well concealed in the spirit of 'ars est celare artem' – the art lying in concealing the art) is *one important question* 'What is it to be human?' *The arts allow a community to scrutinize its own values and meaning, make those values and meanings explicit, attractive and challenge perspectives.* The beauty of a film like *The King's Speech* is that we are entertained, stimulated and engrossed, and all these deeper reflections seep in to our consciousness without advertising themselves as such.

The film is not just about stammering. Amongst other things, it brings British royal history alive, explores the difficulties experienced by a boy coping with the huge expectations of his father, child abuse, and portrays two brothers coping with the same family upbringing in very different ways. It also, of course, explores in depth the experience of one man coping with his stammer. However, for someone working in the field of arts in healthcare this film was deeply insightful in its portrayal of the emotional experience of this man's illness.

It also reminds us of the devastating impact that 'minor' conditions can have. Stammering is not a life-threatening condition. It is not high on the list of priorities for medicine and health services, and access to services is very limited. However, it was notable that a condition which so affects fluency, part of the currency of everyday life, has such huge emotional impact on the patient. Colin Firth brilliantly portrays the terror, frustration and anger experienced by a person dealing with this difficulty and we feel ourselves the effect it has, not only on him, but also his family.

The speech 'therapist' in the film was a controversial figure, not least because he does not have a true professional qualification. This was an interesting point for reflection about professional registration and its significance. He did not pursue a traditional course of treatment, but we came to appreciate both the physical approaches and deeper emotional work which was necessary for this patient. The lasting impression of the film, however, was the suffering experienced by this man, his courage in staying with his treatment programme and the need for treatment to be available to people with this neglected condition.

As a health professional working in a general hospital, I was also reminded of the many barriers that people face when engaging with health services, and the residual effects that people carry from previous treatment when they go to the hospital. We saw the King moving between compliance and rejection of treatment, and it was important for the therapist in this situation to take note of the patient's personal narrative in order to engage successfully with him. The issues of professional boundaries and the many aspects of a successful therapeutic relationship were also presented brilliantly.

This film was a perfect example of the power of the arts to help us understand and reflect on patients' experience. This is a part of an evolving programme in many medical schools in Ireland (including Trinity College Dublin) whereby students are encouraged to reflect more deeply on patient journeys, but also society's expectations. This has been described both for nurses - *Aesthetic expressions are important for (nursing students) as they sensitize student nurses to the patients' situations* (Wikstrom 2000) and doctors - *patients need hospital environments beyond purely fixing medical problems ... they need to be accompanied through their illnesses in various ways ... a scientifically competent medicine alone cannot help a patient grapple with the loss of health or find meaning in suffering* (Charon 2001).

Cinema is an almost universal forum, accessible to all, and provides an ideal reflector of individual life trajectories and social themes. *The King's Speech* is an example of its potency to deliver important messages to healthcare workers and students, while simultaneously stimulating and entertaining.

References on request

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