

A sign of our times

Dr Xaftellis laments the declining age of innocence

This incident is not particular to medicine, but it is an event that took place at our practice. Unfortunately, it is a sign of our times, when occasionally we have to question the innocence of some of our patients.

Having finally made it to the toilet after hours of coughs and colds, psychosocial counselling and pap smears, I was relieved to have a moment's peace. Unfortunately, again, there was no toilet paper (the problem of having to share one toilet among staff and patients). So off I went to the chemist and bought the expensive, double ply, patterned six-pack. While I was out, my new drug company pen disappeared from my table. It's just amazing how pens vanish. In my enquiries, I discovered that lately things had been disappearing at a more rapid rate than usual and had included items like the toilet deodoriser. One of our receptionists thought she had pinpointed the culprit to a female drug abuser who had been frequenting our practice. As fate had it, my first patient for the afternoon turned out to be her partner.

For the third time that year the patient claimed that his grandmother had died and he needed temazepam (I always write down drug seekers' excuses as it makes great ammunition when turning down their requests). After I dealt with the issue by suggesting the patient needed counselling, he bent down to put the list of phone numbers I had given him into his bag. And there it was – a six-pack of double ply, patterned toilet paper. I was furious. It was bad enough that I had just spent 20 minutes of emotional energy on someone who really didn't care but had to keep up his pretence, but he had just stolen my one luxury of the day.

Confronting the issue

What should I do? If I confronted him he might become abusive and I didn't feel like expending more energy. But how could I let him get away with it? Is respect for others and their property really that low in the community? I had had enough



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of being walked on. So as the patient went to leave, I said, 'Goodbye' and then casually stated, 'By the way, if that's our toilet paper can you please put it back on the way out? Thanks'.

He looked stunned, as he muttered, 'Ah, no. I bought it before I came.'

Hmm, I thought, that paper cost \$5.95 and he'd asked for temazepam from the sample cupboard rather than having to pay for a prescription.

'I wasn't accusing you', I said, 'It's just that people steal everything from the surgery and it costs us a fortune to replace it all'.

'Really', he replied, naively and wide-eyed. 'What things?'

'Oh you know, pens, script pads, drug samples, pregnancy tests, air freshener cans from the toilet.' He went white. 'Anyway, I thought I would ask just in case. Have a good day,' I said as I stood up, gesturing that it was time for him to leave.

Of course we never got the toilet paper back and we really didn't care. Although I am not convinced that the patient was innocent, I had a satisfying feeling of achievement. Afterwards things disappeared at their normal rate again, and, incidentally, the patient did return – when his grandmother died, again. **MT**

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