

We All Need a Dose of the Doctor

The healing relationship between patient and physician plays a vital role in medical care

Yet as science confirms the power of the healing relationship, other forces are conspiring to undermine it. Health systems can leave patients and doctors feeling stressed out and alienated from one another. Relationships take time. Fifteen minutes may be long enough for a practitioner to diagnose an infection and dash off a prescription. It's rarely enough to make sense of another person's experience, convey that understanding or act as an advocate.

The medical profession, to its credit, is struggling to revive the healing relationship. Many medical schools are trying to pull health care away from an exclusive focus on disease and toward the promotion of

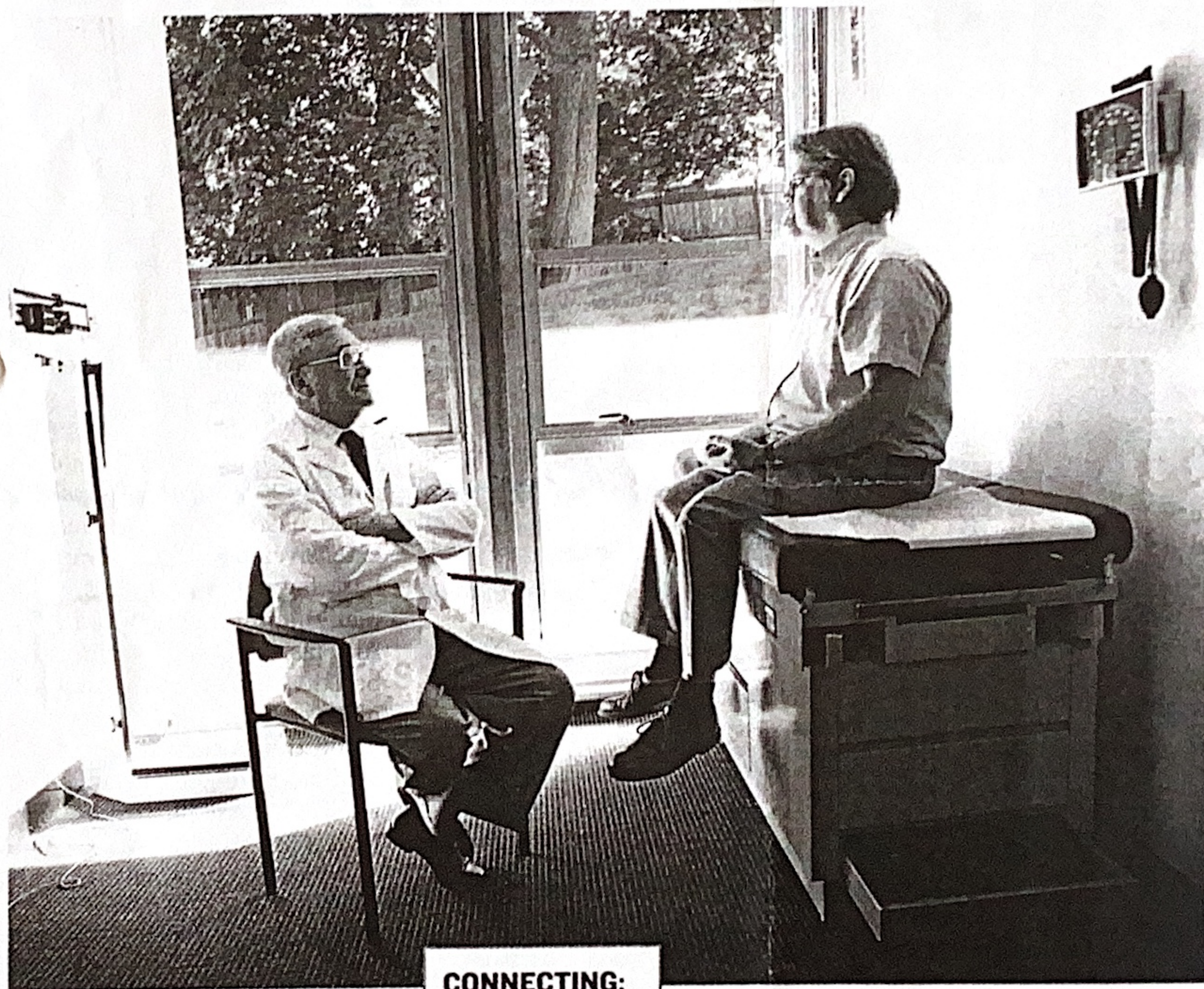
wellness, stressing the doctor's role as partner, teacher and coach. Consumers, for their part, are venturing outside the medical system in search of healing practices that involve more of the human touch. Few of these patients would give up effective drugs or surgery in favor of more sympathy, but most recognize that pills and procedures are an incomplete model of care.

Anyone with access to health care can take steps to improve the therapeutic exchange. Step one is to communicate freely. Educate yourself about whatever condition ails you, and share the information you find. Don't hold back for fear of being a nuisance. A good clinician is eager to teach and learn, and willing to acknowledge medicine's limits. In fact, the healing relationship can grow stronger when a doctor runs out of more treatments to offer. In that moment, he or she sheds authority and becomes a peer who is struggling with the emotional consequences of illness. Doctor and patient be-

come allies in an effort to sustain hope and find meaning in suffering.

For a healing relationship to thrive, then, patients must be experts about their needs, values and objectives. Doctors must be experts on wellness and illness. Few physicians emerge from training without some qualms about caring for other people. We learn that even when we can't cure illness, we can make it less baffling and less onerous. The value of the doctor-patient relationship is not always easy to measure, but it is always immeasurable.

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People who know and like their clinicians may get better results

BY MICHAEL C. MILLER, M.D.

YOU'RE THE DOCTOR. Your patient feels ill, but you don't have anything curative in your medicine bag.

What do you do? That question has long stymied physicians. But as the Hungarian psychoanalyst Michael Balint recognized a half century ago, mystifying symptoms are not necessarily untreatable. Listen to patients' stories, Balint urged his colleagues. Treat them as friends. They may need a dose of the strongest drug of all: the doctor.

Balint's prescription is as timely today as it was in the 1950s. A founding insight of

mind-body medicine is that everyone needs a dose of the doctor, even when state-of-the-art tests and treatments are available. Patients who have a good and trusting relationship with a clinician are more satisfied, studies show—and satisfied patients get better clinical results. They're more motivated to take care of themselves, more comfortable seeking help when problems arise and more willing to follow advice and take medication as prescribed. A healthy doctor-patient relationship can also give consolation when bad news comes. The relationship itself provides an emotional safety net.