

From Prometheus to Element Care

De Prometeo a Element Care

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When Prometheus' liver was daily devoured by the eagle that Zeus would send each day to the Caucasus mountains where the titan was kept in chains, pain was the price to pay for disobedience and immortality. Prometheus' insurrection was sealed after he stole the fire from the gods and gave it to men so they could heat themselves, cook food, make utensils, and have a divine spark inside of them to become spiritual and intelligent beings, thus bringing them a little closer to the gods and away from the animal kingdom. The immortal nature of Prometheus would regenerate the liver only to see it devoured again the next day. Only Hercules put an end to Prometheus' torment when he broke the chains of his sentence.

This Greek myth of the demi-god is a good analogy of the evolution of medicine from ancient to modern times. Suffering; disease; wisdom; hope; cure, and eventually immortality. It has been the greed shown by Homo sapiens that has tried to conquer the fire stolen by the Greek hero.

It is precisely this human exchange that has allowed us to evolve as a species. We have been able to conquer our planet, cure diseases, control epidemics, and fight our kind to the benefit but also to the detriment of our own world and at the expense of the extinction of millions of species, the very subjugation of death, and the suffering of millions of our own people.

Throughout history, doctors have been perceived by others as holders of some sort of a special talent. The first physicians were healers, shamans who understood the laws of the ancient universe and had a special connection with the divine. In addition to having a secret knowledge of plants, herbs, and minerals with healing potential, their wisdom had been transmitted through oral tradition from one family to the other or through genetic inheritance as some sort of natural selection of only those individuals with the necessary conditions to become healers. These were exceptional individuals among the ancient human groups who were measured by the highest standards and revered by the different societies. They were possibly Prometheus' chosen ones as holders of that "extra fire".

Medical science evolved with extraordinary advances for all mankind by drastically reducing child mortality at the end of the 20th century, improving life expectancy in most countries up to 75 years of age (by 2050 the estimates are that human beings will live up to 100 years old), and ultimately by managing successfully most of the diseases that plague the Homo sapiens.¹

After the Second World War, medicine was revolutionized, a sort of golden age if you will, with the appearance of antibiotics, vaccines, new anesthetic agents, breaking surgical procedures, and new drugs. Doctors were respected and admired; the doctor-patient interchange was based on conversations and deep scrutiny of the intimate life of individuals and rigorous physical examinations following all rules of semiology.

These advances were followed by universal medical plans and health reforms, making medicine lose its human dimension of that doctor-patient relationship. Thus, the infamous "cost-benefit" ratio became a priority and technology was incentivized creating a gap between humanity and science and, on many occasions, verbal communication, so essential to understand each other, was simply gone and doctors became technicians or service providers overnight whose effectiveness was put under the microscope.

This was the birth of the so-called "junk consultation" that leads to countless complaints from users (our patients) who are rushed inside a world of unnecessary tests, studies, and procedures that have an excessive, and in most countries, unsustainable cost for the health-care system.

The irony is that by improving life expectancy we end up having more old patients who, on many occasions, suffer from loneliness and grief. With today's medical approach, doctors simply cannot bring any remedies to them. Instead, nearness is needed here to examine the natural condition of man and be able to develop our profession fully by offering that lenitive as part of the medical prescription.

Ms. Ellen Trane Nørby, secretary of health in Denmark, one of the highest ranking countries in effective healthcare systems worldwide has said: "Something must be wrong in Denmark when we're spending 50% of the healthcare budget in the last 90 days of a human life to delay the inevitable in just a few weeks."²

Abandonment, sadness, and isolation in old patients who live in developed countries generates astronomical costs at the ER when they are actually looking for social support.

An article published on *The New York Times*³ has brought the program *Element Care* –non lucrative and for old adults– to everyone's attention. This program provides those elderly who are eligible with one tablet with a software and a virtual pet that

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interacts with them, talks to them about sports and pastimes, shows them memories of their lives and, above all, tells them that they are loved.

The patients know that this device is connected to an emerging startup called Care Coach. They also know that the employees who operate this platform see, listen and give remote answers to them, but at the end of the day they come to love their little pet, feeling that they still mean something and that someone else still cares.³

Today's society is on a non-stop rampage towards progress. We are modernizing consumption without having developed thought first and we are embarked on a technological frenzy that perpetuates itself and turns us into isolated entities that only interact with one another through cybernetic applications. Let us commit ourselves to becoming social individuals back again and humanizing artificial intelligence. Let us be a replica of our ancestors who lived their lives around the fire given to them by the good titan Prometheus.

As physicians I think we should look in the mirror for just a second and ask ourselves whether we are treating patients the same way we would like to be treated. If the answer is no, let's make hugs last longer than our well-known narcissism.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None reported.

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