

Compassion

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In his article “ChatGPT and Medicine: Fears, Fantasy, and the Future of Physicians” in this issue of the *Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles*, Christopher J. Peterson, MD, discusses the concern some in the medical profession may experience about the computer program ChatGPT. He points out that this generative artificial intelligence program apparently was able to “pass an examination [USMLE] that medical students spend years preparing for... For medicine, the question becomes that if this machine can not only ‘talk’ like a doctor but also passes the same examinations, what’s keeping it from taking our place as well?”¹

Dr. Peterson focuses on the obvious difference between the ChatGPT program and the human physician—the qualities of empathy and compassion. Certainly, the AI program can analyze medical data and organize it into reasonable answers to complex questions, but as Dr. Peterson cites, one patient remarked, “We can’t be reduced to data.”¹ The physician’s role is not only that of a diagnostician, but as a healer, one who develops a compassionate relationship with his or her patient. In the article’s section “The Human Element,” Dr. Peterson concedes that ChatGPT may be able to appear empathetic in its responses, but he doubts that patients will want reassurance or kinship with a computer program.

The Doctor, a Victorian painting by Sir Luke Fildes (1843–1927) is an effective portrayal of the empathetic and compassionate physician. In a cottage’s darkened room, a gravely ill young child lies on a makeshift bed across two chairs, an indistinct parent hovering in the shadows. The doctor sits beside the child, leaning forward, his head supported by one



Luke Fildes. *The Doctor*. 1891. The Tate Gallery, London.²

hand, as he gazes at the pale face and the limp arm. It seems as though he has done what he can, but the prognosis may be grim.

The only light comes from the slanted shade of the oil lamp on the table at the left of the painting. This light draws the viewer’s eye to the right, first to the doctor’s intense expression then to the child in the center of the painting; the apparent tension in the doctor’s posture contrasts with the languid features of the sleeping child. From the humble surroundings, it is apparent that the family is of modest means, but the doctor may have monitored the child all night, regardless of the family’s ability to pay his fee. Dr. Peterson includes this iconic painting in his article as an example of “the humanity and empathy that are associated with the practice of medicine... Patients want *human* doctors, both literally and morally.”¹ No artificially intelligent computer program will ever replace the compassionate physician.

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2. Fildes, L. *The Doctor*. 1891. The Tate Gallery. London, England. Wikimedia Commons.