

A revisit to Medical Ethics and Professionalism based on the movie Patch Adams by Tom Shadyac

Patch Adams is a movie based on the character of Dr Hunter Doherty "Patch" Adams. It depicts how close a doctor can be to a patient and how quality of life of a patient depends not only on medicine but also on the mental status of the patient. He also fights for the health insurance systems available in the society he lives in. The film is directed by Tom Shadyac and produced by Mike Farrell. Starring Robin Williams plays the role of "Hunter Patch Adams". The film was released on December 1998 in US.

Dr Hunter Adams is an American physician born in 1945. He is popular as a Comedian, an author and as a social activist. He founded the "Gesundheit!" Institute in 1971. A group of volunteers led by him travels around the world annually, dressed as clowns to bring about humor in orphans and patients. Currently he is serves as the "Assistant Secretary of Health for Holistic Health" in US.

According to the film, Patch Adams attempts suicide and is sent to a mental hospital. There he learns to look at challenges of life more creatively and face them. He enjoys attending to people in need and being helpful. He enters Medical College with the aim of serving for patients. As a medical student, he works closely with patients more as a friend than a doctor. Dean of the faculty believes that the Doctors should approach patients only for medical treatment and not bond with them as fellow humans. He believes that the sense of humor as an act against the professionalism of a doctor. Due to clashes with Dean based on these views he is almost expelled from the Medical College.

The character of Dr Adams expresses a different role of a doctor than what the society has experienced. He is different to other doctors by the way of approaching his patients and is also more successful. The role of a doctor beyond recommending medical treatment is depicted throughout the movie. This is shown by contrasting his character with his roommate. The roommate's character depicts a doctor who is full of theoretical knowledge and works hard. But in contrast at clinical practice Adams is far beyond him, due to his relationship with patients and other staff members such as nurses and attendants.

At a gynecology and obstetrics conference Adams decorates the entrance with a pair of stretched legs, showing that a little humor would not harm the conduct of a doctor. His sense of humor makes it much easier for him to get on with patients and treat them more effectively.

When he was accused of running a medical clinic, he explains his views as "Every person that comes to my clinic is a patient as well as a doctor". By this statement he makes clear that doctor has not only a role of prescribing medicine. He defines doctor as a compassionate person who is able to support the uplifting of patients quality of life, by any mean. This broad concept of the role of a doctor gives a good picture of the ethics of medicine, how a doctor is not framed by his duties of offering the relevant medicine or proper diagnosis.

The film does not give significant attention to the academic side of Patch Adams. The director shows that he has best results but it never shows how he got there. As a medical student, it is equally important to know the facts as to be passionate. The statement made by Adam's roommate stating that if he spends a minute more with his academic work he may be able to learn a way to save a patient's life shows how important it is to have a proper theoretical knowledge before approaching the patient. This aspect is rather masked by the attention paid to the compassionate and humane approach of Patch Adams towards the patients. The film does not show medical techniques followed by Adams. Thus the balance between care and treatment is not depicted well in this movie.

At the medical college Adams falls in love with a fellow batch mate who helps him with his voluntary clinic. She gets murdered while she is working for Adam's voluntary movement. Patch Adams is left with guilt and a question whether he could sympathize and trust humans as he used to do. But he gets through the emotions and returns back to his voluntary work. Patch Adams is introduced as a mentally unstable character who attempted suicide at the beginning of the movie. But with this incident the spectator gets to know that he has grown himself to a mentally stable character able to face challenges in life.

The movie ends with the incidence of graduation of Patch Adams as an MBBS doctor. At the Graduation ceremony Adams is present wearing only his graduation cloak so that his nude backside is exposed while he bends to bow. This incident shows his limitless humor and his attitudes on the Dean. He does not care much about professionalism values related to his job. This can be interpreted in two ways. In one way, by forgetting professionalism values, he can go to the level of patients and be their friend easily. But on the other hand a patient who is ill comes to a hospital helpless and expects both cure and care. Such a patient needs a doctor on whom he can rely on. A doctor who does not care about his personal outlook may give an impression of an irresponsible character to the patient thus he may have doubts on depending on him for good health and recovery. When he is charged for running a clinic as an undergraduate his friend insists him to buy a suite. This can be taken as an example as to how the professional outlook is important in giving a good first impression to public. Humans tend to judge people mostly by the first impression they get when they see a new being. If Patch Adams cared more about professional values, without changing his attitudes and values on ethics he may improve the quality of his service while improving the impact he has on the public.

Patch Adams is a must watch film for medical students as it shows that both patient and doctor are human beings; doctor is not superior to patient. He is a model of medical ethics and values. No human being is perfect. Adams lacks professional conduct. He could have made more impact on public if he had developed his professionalism. This would have even helped him to obtain more funds for his voluntary movement.

ME/2012/106

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Batch 25th