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SUMMARY

We can no longer count on any certainty about what might happen next year much less in the coming decade. A rogue microbe has turned our world upside down and held a mirror to our fallibility and our frailty as a species. Nevertheless, we have never been stronger, more innovative, and more united. We need not fear the future because we are in this together and just over the horizon are those who would give their all to make it better. The *JHD* is but one platform for those who demonstrate this truth and who demonstrate agency, which is the birth right of everyone on this planet. The message has been received. We are not alone, and each day can be better than the one that has just passed.

Key Words

Health design; Art of doctoring; Patient consultation; Doctor-patient relationship; Patient advocacy

INTRODUCTION

As 2021 draws to a close, we at *The Journal of Health Design* celebrate our growing engagement with patient advocates and clinicians working to improve outcomes in health care. It is now more obvious than ever that we can improve care for all, if only in our locality. As clinicians we don't get to choose our working conditions, the clinic, or hospital policies, or even the décor of our working environment, but we do get to choose our attitude. We do get to decide how we come across in the first few minutes of every meeting with a patient. It is in those seconds (literally) that we will either succeed as healers or lose the plot no matter our technical skills. Patient advocates, and particularly those who live with chronic and rare conditions, tell us that outcomes will improve largely because of:

1. Progress in science, and genomics in particular;
2. The growing influence of advocates in framing health policy;
3. Technology that allows us to deliver health care across geographical challenges; and
4. The democratisation of science so that knowledge is more accessible.

To that list, as was evident in our podcast conversations in 2021, we might add:

5. Making the most of the 15 minutes that we have on average in a doctor-patient consultation.

Small change, big difference. Better health by design.

It has been a privilege to lead The JHD this year and to host The Health Design podcast. I have enjoyed engaging with our many guests, each with their own unique story and passion, courage, and conviction to improve patients' healthcare journeys and experiences. But much of the work was done by those who share the vision, including and especially our wonderful managing editor Tammy McCausland, and John Novack, our community engagement advisor. We also sincerely thank our reviewers and editorial board members. What their work has demonstrated is that the world is a big place and every voice can count. At the same time, our team has highlighted that we face similar challenges the world over. The same limitations in access to health care, the same variable experience of medicine and similar challenges to our capacity to make a difference to those who are most in need.

If 2020 was the year of the pandemic, 2021 was the year of denial or hesitancy. Therefore, a highlight for me in 2021 was the paper by Nikki Montgomery and our subsequent conversation on the Health Design podcast.^{1,2} In her abstract, Nikki wrote:

The prevalence of conversations about trust in health care seems to have increased since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Frequently, the discussion focuses on vaccine hesitancy among people of colour in the US and historical reasons for their mistrust in the healthcare system. The premise has been that increasing trust in health care will increase the likelihood that African Americans will take the COVID-19 vaccine. Conversely, focusing on the anxieties and realities caused by persistent disparate outcomes might offer an honest and transparent way to promote vaccine uptake, while acknowledging the systemic issues that erode trust.

In the light of her experience of appalling prejudice—if not mistreatment—she focused on what we can all do today to mitigate against the risks of the pandemic. We are not even close to a cure for COVID-19, and were such a thing on the horizon, it is likely that those *en route* to adverse outcomes would be last in line to receive the benefit. Montgomery's call for us to do what we can to reduce these risks was particularly timely. Small change, big difference. It is telling that a patient advocate made a call based on the context of what little health care has to offer to the underprivileged or those who are not seen or heard but might find themselves wanting.

In 2021, I also had the honour of working with Kimberly Warner on several projects but especially on the creation of a course to help doctors recognise when they are not present during their consultations.³ The course is aimed at medical students before they find themselves delivering care in the world beyond graduation. As with the theme of our work—small change, big difference—we created a resource that can be accessed by any medical student, online, for free and which has the scope to make a difference to improve the patient experience without needing a different healthcare policy. The other experience we can share at The JHD is that of the breathtaking generosity of those who have suffered and yet want to make things better. We thank our patient advocate community across the world and our champions, including and especially BJ Miller, Kimberly Warner, Ann Graham, Annie Brewster, Victor Montori, Mary Donovan, Mika Newton, Craig Rayner, and Elizabeth Jameson. The world in 2021 is a more hopeful,

kinder, more generous place than it might appear as we have witnessed riots, protests, and angry mobs harking to the divisions that could mar the communities in which we all live.

As we get the end of 2021 I am not making any predictions. That was for an era before a virus taught us the folly of trying to map the future based on what we thought was certain, reliable, and tangible. What we can say is that we will be guided by our friends and by our understanding that we have and are duty bound to exercise agency. We do not have to be the victims of pandemics or politics. Our friends may live on another continent, but they share our experiences and our sense of hope and determination that we can make a difference merely by refusing to be defined by the limitations of our imagination, our geography, or the views of those who see the world through jaundiced eyes. We go into 2022 believing in those who have had a conversation with me on the Health Design podcast. They are already making a difference today, and they are unstoppable. Wishing you all a peaceful holiday season and much happiness in 2022 come what may.

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