

An unforgivable delay

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When I was a young doctor I temporarily replaced an established internist in my town. One morning, a 45-year-old woman came to me in a state of high anxiety. She had noticed a deep-seated soft swelling in her right thigh. She told me openly that she had not wanted to come to me because she thought I was too young, but she felt she could not wait for the return of the regular physician a month later. At the same time she continually asked me for reassurance. "Is it true, doctor, that this is nothing to worry about? It is just a cyst, isn't it?"

Upon examination I touched a soft, subcutaneous, 3.5 cm long and 2 cm wide, indolent, and non-lobulated tumour in the anterior femoral region, just above the right sartorius muscle. The tumour had somehow grown into the surrounding tissue, the slipping sign was dubious, and inguinal nodes were

not to be found. I quickly reassured the patient that I thought the tumour was a lipoma, and sent her home calm and happy again. 5 weeks later the regular physician called me to say that just after my departure he had sent the patient to the hospital for a suspicious tumour in her right thigh. The diagnosis was metastasis of malignant melanoma.

I have never forgotten this woman and my urge to reassure her. I wanted to make her happy, but I was also embarrassed by her mistrust. Inexperienced and anxious myself, I let her pass onto me her desire to be reassured. Today as a psychiatrist I know the power of the unconscious contagion of human emotions very well. I thank the physician for calling me knowing I would be upset, and I apologise to this patient and her family for my mistake.

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