More blessed to receive?

Anthony R Moore  Department of surgery,
University of Melbourne, Royal Melbourne Hospital,
Victoria, Australia

There are many strange examples of foggy self-
justification. One of the worst comes from those
doctors who justify their earnings on the basis of the
storm and stress of their job. ‘We deserve our pile,’
they say ‘as compensation for the burdens of our
work.’

Now I am not a foe to those who like to make lists
of the liabilities of medical practice. Most reasonable
people admit them: the broken nights and the
exposure to suffering and sickness; the incessant
emotional demands and the stresses on the doctor’s
family, and so on. Certainly, I admit that measured
in financial terms alone, the just return for these
trials would be hard to determine. I expect a union
negotiator could win a substantial wage for doctors.

The thing that pains me and enrages many other
doctors is that the profession as a whole is stained by
those who act as if money were the only valid reward
from practice.

I see it this way. One of the truths of medical
practice is that those shabby doctors who are most
preoccupied with money are either inadequate as
doctors, or, more commonly, practise the sort of
short-changing medicine that brings us all into
disrepute.

In a rather perverse way some doctors who have
imperfect personalities have tried to win the
acceptance of their colleagues by acting as
professional crusaders for more cash. Any humanity
they have can be bought and sold.

They degrade themselves and they debilitate our
profession.

Perhaps it is because they rarely receive the other
returns that come from caring for patients that they
make grasping their goal and god.

Now I do not want to fire at professional greed in
this note. That needs greater guns and I’m keeping
my powder dry. Instead, I want to reveal the
rewards of practice that some doctors cherish most,
because I believe these prizes are the incentives
which should compensate for the mighty demands
of medical practice.

If you ask a doctor ‘Which have been the most
memorable moments of your professional life?’, some
will confess it was the excellence of a diagnosis
that relieved suffering; others, a therapeutic success
that saved a life. Occasionally it is the triumph of a
significant medical discovery, or a distinction
awarded by one’s colleagues.

But most commonly there dwells in one’s past a
cherished recollection of some small kindness or
gratitude which a patient offered in return for your
care. To this one’s memory returns with a strange
sense of humility and gratification. Humility,
because such gestures always bespeak an expression
of trust, and gratification because they are a response
to some human restoration.

The patient’s improvement may not have been
physical. The things a doctor does to lift a patient’s
spirit or to encourage his resolve to overcome a
stress are just as important. So is that sense of
‘someone there’ to whom the patient can turn
during those moments of chaos when one’s world
seems to be disintegrating.

The doctor’s reward need not be material. A
direct gaze from appreciative eyes, the hand placed
over the handshake, or the face open with trust: they
all speak intensely.

Occasionally something special happens. A single
flower found on one’s desk after the patient has
hurried away. A gruff hand shoves a bottle at you,
wrapped in brown paper roughened by the twist of
diffident tenderness. Sometimes it’s a cake made,
a duck ready for roasting. A bag of spuds ‘dug out
meself with me one bloody leg’.

I’ve always felt there’s something fundamental
about a gift of food. A gesture of someone’s desire
that you must survive.

These gifts are valued by the doctor because they
are symbolic of the patient’s gratitude that you have,
in some way, treated them as a special individual.
Special in that they feel their concern was your
greatest preoccupation.

Just as the patient’s memory of the doctor who
offered a thoughtfulness tailored specifically for
him is held most dear, so too a gratitude that is
specially chosen or directed to the doctor is valued
supremely. The reasons are identical. The mutual
reward is beautifully appropriate.

Sometimes the reward is indirect. For example,
the way the world’s colours seem richer when
viewed through the prism of a patient’s courage.
The body that bears its burden without complaint
always fortifies the doctor and reduces the weight of
his or her own worries.
The return which means most is never money; yet we rarely admit it.

One of the treasured customs of our profession has been the courtesy that one doctor would never charge another for a medical service. Some still adhere to it. But many adopt the attitude that "because we're all insured now, just send the bill." I suppose it's easier to write out a cheque than to choose a special gift.

Over the past few years many words have been spoken at the many meetings I have attended about money and medicine. In every hall and hospital a lot has been said about freedom of practice, sessional payments, government intrusion into practice, and so on. Much has been mouthed about the returns due to doctors. But I have never heard one word uttered that confessed what many doctors feel is the most endearing form of remuneration: a human gesture of appreciation.

A savage question to ask would be, how many doctors would accept this gift in place of a fee? I suppose it would be Quixotic to even think that someone would prefer payment in kind. The question has never asked, "If doctors deserve a special return for their work, why do those rewards need so exclusively to be economic ones?"

If doctors really hold dear the professional rewards of practice above money, why don't they act with that conviction? If they don't value them, then they would please those of us who do by leaving the profession they discredit.

It is the same in practice as it is in life: the richness of one's return is equal to one's human concern.