

# Reflecting Upon the Nature of Empathy and the Psychosocial Burden of Psoriasis.

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## Keywords

Medical Elective | Psoriasis | Clinical Empathy | Cognitive Load | Psychosocial Burden | Reflection |

## Abbreviations

None

All author(s) made substantive intellectual contributions to this study by making substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and giving final approval of the version to be published.

**Accepted for publication:** 29<sup>th</sup> June 2026

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<https://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/ajpp/index>

**ISSN Number:** Online 2059-3198. Copyright © 2015 by the University of Kent, UK.

**FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE:** The author has indicated that they have no financial relationships relevant to this article to disclose.



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**Abstract:** This reflection analyses the tension between clinical objectives and patient-centred care within an outpatient setting. A hyper-focus on the biomedical aspects led to a profound deficiency in recognising the psychosocial effect of the disease upon the patient. This reflection seeks to explain this phenomenon through Cognitive Load Theory and its documented contribution to empathy decline. The reflection concludes with a structured guardrail to minimise the risk of this issue occurring in the student's future practice.

## Reflection on my Elective

### *The Elective*

Taking place across both outpatient clinics and inpatient wards, this dermatology elective involved participating in the assessment and management of various acute and chronic dermatological conditions. It provided practical experience in dermatological history taking and examination skills. I found these to have both greatly improved by the end of the placement.

### *Elective Objectives*

The main objectives for my elective

were:

- To further develop confidence in taking focused dermatological histories and performing skin examinations.
- To improve diagnostic reasoning and generate differential diagnoses for common dermatological presentations.
- To improve my management and patient education skills, explaining conditions clearly and empathetically.

### Reflection

In a dermatology outpatient clinic, I participated in a follow-up appointment for an adult male patient with a severe flare of plaque psoriasis; my objective during this encounter was to explain the transition from topical steroids to systemic therapies in a patient-centered manner. From an entirely clinical perspective, I managed to explain the transition to systemic therapies and the necessary monitoring, I also felt like I answered his clinical questions well.

However, upon my initial reflection on the encounter, I quickly realised that my approach was entirely one-sided. When hyper-focussing on the biomedical side of the consultation, amid a perceived pressure to 'impress' the doctor I was partnered with, I completely failed to explore or recognise the profound psychosocial burden this illness was having upon the patient. I only noticed the disconnect when I observed the patient in a broader context rather than just clinical: his body language of rhythmic fidgeting, an avoidance of eye contact and his visible discomfort during the exam made it clear how

much he was struggling. This highlighted an immediate and glaring pitfall: a tendency to prioritise clinical efficacy over the empathetic engagement so critical to these cases.

This experience aligns with the documented research, where the deep psychosocial comorbidities associated with psoriasis, including social isolation and depression, are extensively documented and often disproportionate to the physical severity of the cutaneous plaques (Kimball *et al.*, 2005; Luna *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, medical students and doctors often report a documented 'empathy decline' in challenging clinical environments – this effect can be understood through Cognitive Load Theory, where high mental loads can exceed working memory capacity (Young *et al.*, 2014; Stratta, Riding and Baker, 2016). This may offer an explanation to my previously detailed experience, where the workload of the biomedical side of the consultation 'occupied my bandwidth', leaving little capacity to recognise the patient's emotional distress.

### Conclusion

To ensure this experience changes my future practice for the better, I will ask at least one open-ended question about the psychosocial impact of the disease or pathology during every chronic disease consultation, specifically in the 'history of presenting complaint' section. This will create a system to ensure that I maintain a holistic approach even when operating at 'maximum bandwidth'. To track how this skill is developing, I will ask each of my

supervisors on subsequent placements for feedback on this front. I intend to begin this in my next rotation, which, as it is in General Practice, will provide me with a great opportunity to implement this and fix a glaring weakness in my previous practice.

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