The therapeutic relationship

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It seemed especially unfair to Simon that his two encounters with the local hospital had required that he be restrained and confined. The first time was an MRI, ordered after an optic neuritis.

'Just lie back, and we'll fit on the headgear,' said the aide. 'Then we'll slip you into the machine and the worst of it will be some clattering noises.'

Simon sat up. Anxiety turned to anger. The aide's gathering impatience was irrelevant to him.

A junior doctor, when summoned for sedation, was sympathetic. But he was a busy health professional with other tasks to attend to.

'Just remember to keep breathing,' this unexpected youth remarked, as he hurriedly left the room.

Simon came to regard the MRI episode, and the tears that accompanied it, as one of his life's shameful moments. If there was another time, he told himself, he would manage things better.

The new opportunity came suddenly, and it was after a biopsy for a skin cancer on his nose.

'Sorry to have to tell you this,' said his family doctor. 'But some of the nasty cells have jumped the boundary, and we're going to have to send you off for some sessions of radiotherapy.'

Simon wiped the perspiration from his phone. He was overtaken with images of being trapped, alone, in a large lead-lined box. His head was enclosed in a rigid mask, and covering this was a solid and suffocating shield. Around him, machinery was hovering like the legs of colossal and indifferent insects.

But with the same clarity, Simon now completely understood how his relationship with the radiation therapists had to be.

He made his first approach at the fitting for his face mask.

'Look, I've got a bit of a problem here with being closed in or held down. I want to do this, but I'm going to need your help. Have you got any ideas how we might do this together?'

Each of the treatments was its own trial, although the days themselves quickly developed a pattern. There was the testy car trip to the centre, and as little time as possible in the waiting room with the banal television, and with the other patients who had turbans and thoughtful eyes.

'Simon, please,' a radiation therapist would announce, standing in the waiting room doorway holding his yellow mesh mask.

Then, he would move into the chamber and climb up onto the metal table. And what a mindful distance it was for him to walk from the one place to the other.

'Morning, Kate. Do you know my drill?'

'Okay. I put the mask on. You count to ten and then I take it off. I put the mask back on and clip it down. And what are you going to do if you need me, Simon?'

'I'll raise my hand.'

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