



# Uncertainty and Language in Diagnosis

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#### THE PRACTITIONER

lightened by the consultant after the most  
scrutiny. Not to receive the positive information  
they seek is often a great disappointment to both  
doctor and patient, but we must remember that  
there are—changing slightly Sir Thomas Browne's  
phraseology—cases indissoluble in physic, and  
a diagnosis is not possible in every instance.  
Frankly to confess ignorance is often wiser than to  
beat about the bush with a hypothetical diagnosis.

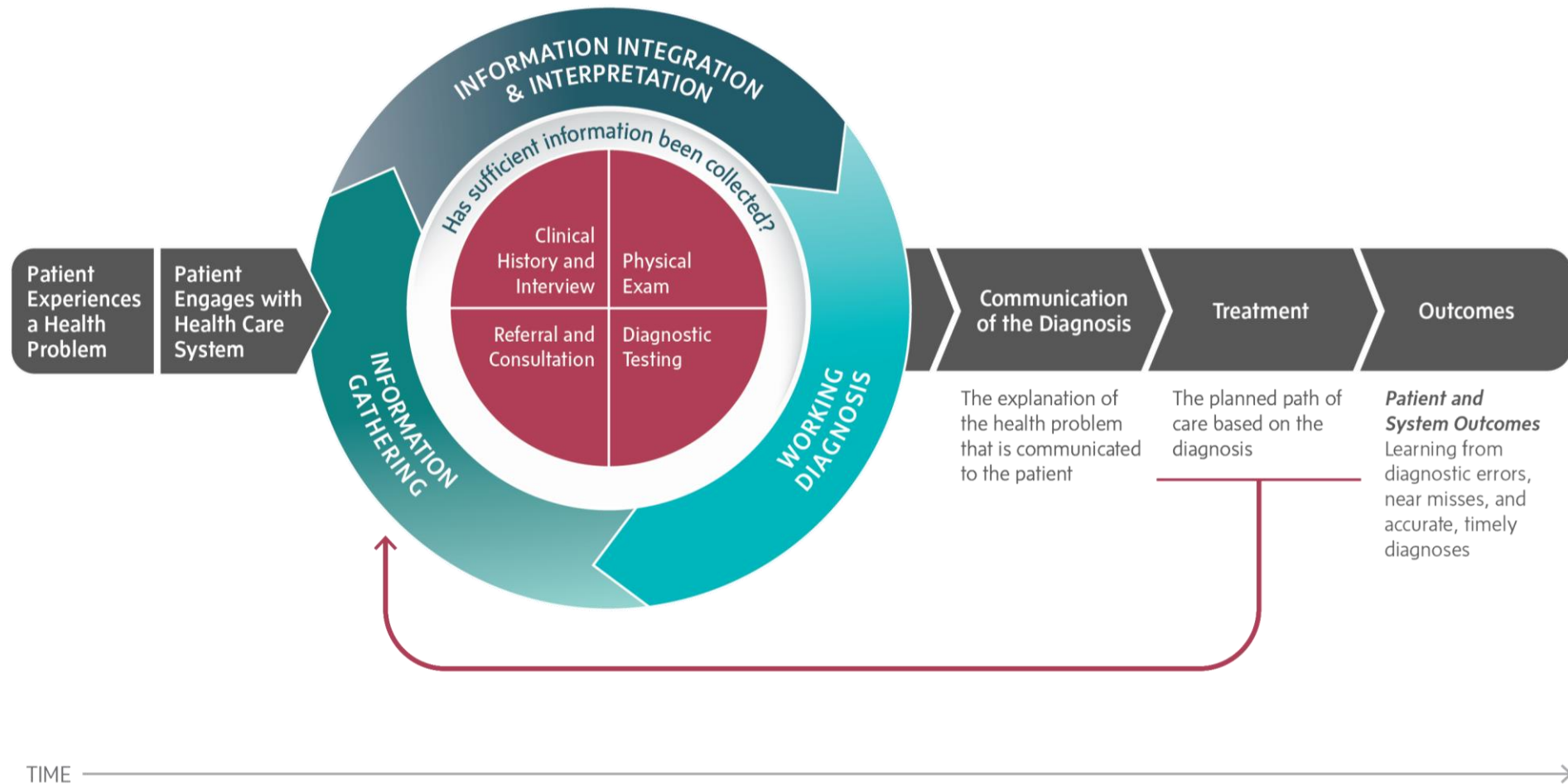
The un-  
pleasant  
features.

A consultant's life is not without unpleasant  
features, chief among which is the passing of judge-  
ment on the unhappy incurables—on the cancerous,  
ataxics, and paralytics, who wander from one city  
to another. Few are able to receive the balm of  
truth, but now and again one meets with a cheery,  
brave fellow, who insists upon a plain, unvarnished  
statement of his prospects. Still more distressing  
are the instances of hopeless illness in which, usually  
for the friends' sake, the entire 'faculty' is sum-  
moned. Is there anything more doleful than the  
procession of four or five doctors into a sick  
room? Who does not appreciate Matthew A.  
ish—

bring to see me cease

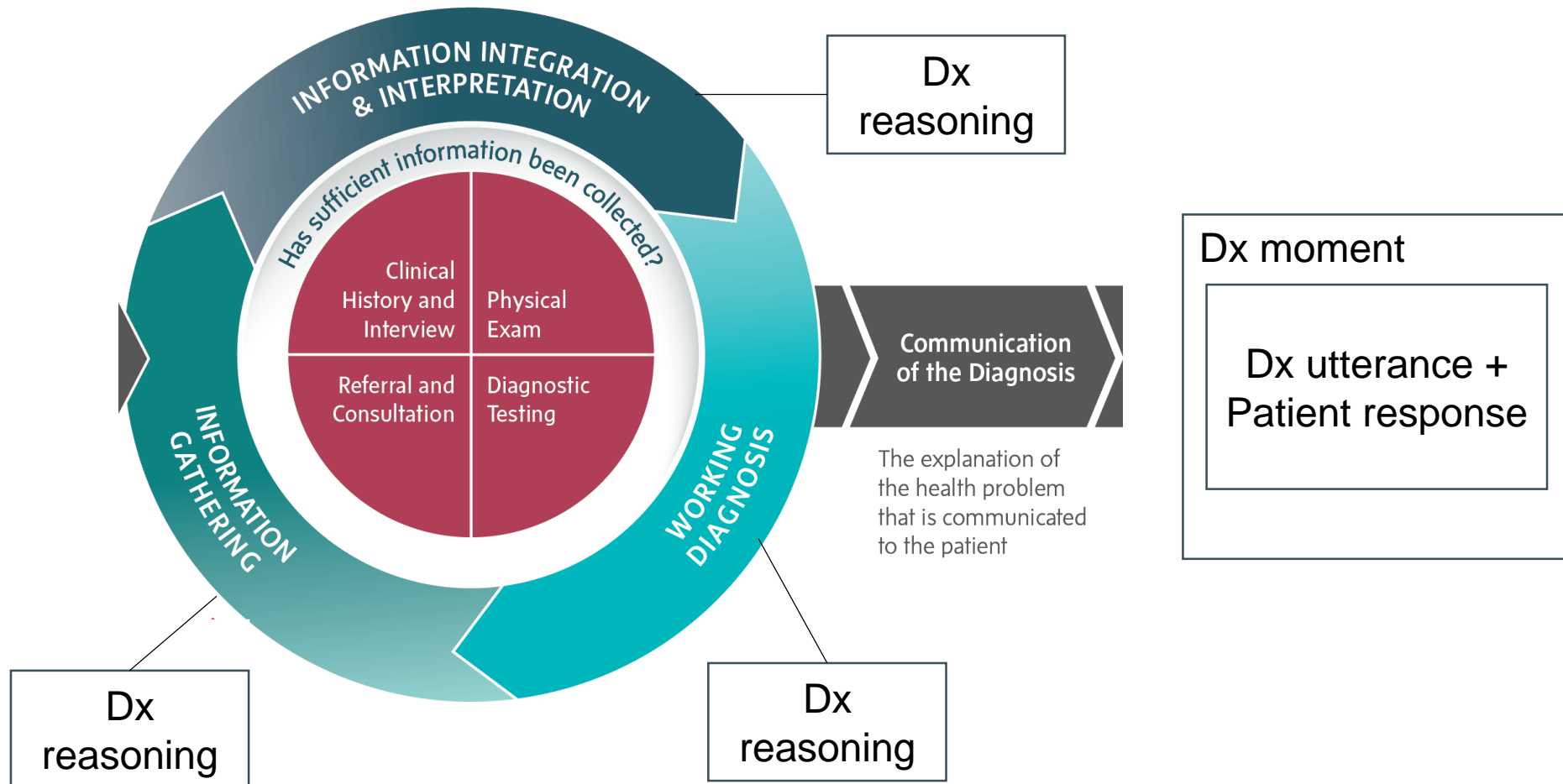
*To confess ignorance  
is often wiser than to  
beat about the bush  
with a hypothetical  
diagnosis.*

# The Diagnostic Process

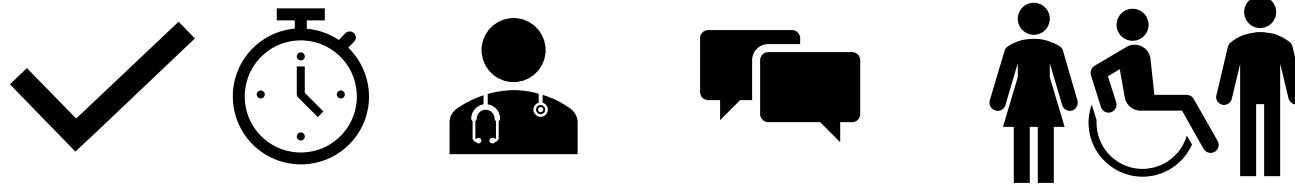


SOURCE: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2015.  
*Improving Diagnosis in Health Care*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

# The Diagnostic Process



# Diagnostic Error



Diagnostic error is the failure to  
(a) establish an accurate and timely explanation of  
the patient's health problem(s)  
**or (b) communicate that explanation to the patient.**

# Uncertainty in patient encounters

Physician expressions of uncertainty during patient encounters<sup>☆</sup>

Patient Education and Counseling 40 (2000) 59–65

Geoffrey H. Gordon M.D., F.A.C.P.<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sandra K. Joos Ph.D.<sup>b</sup>, Jennifer Byrne B.S.<sup>c</sup>

- **Direct expressions of uncertainty in 71% of visits**
- **Did not include indirect expression of uncertainty = mitigation**



# How are diagnoses communicated?



- 66% of diagnoses presented in mitigated statements
- 30% of diagnoses delivered without looking at patient

The diagnostic moment: A study in US primary care

John Heritage\*, Amanda McArthur *Social Science & Medicine* 228 (2019) 262–271



# How are diagnoses communicated?




- You have a throat infection
- You **might** have cracked one of your ribs over there.

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# How are diagnoses communicated?

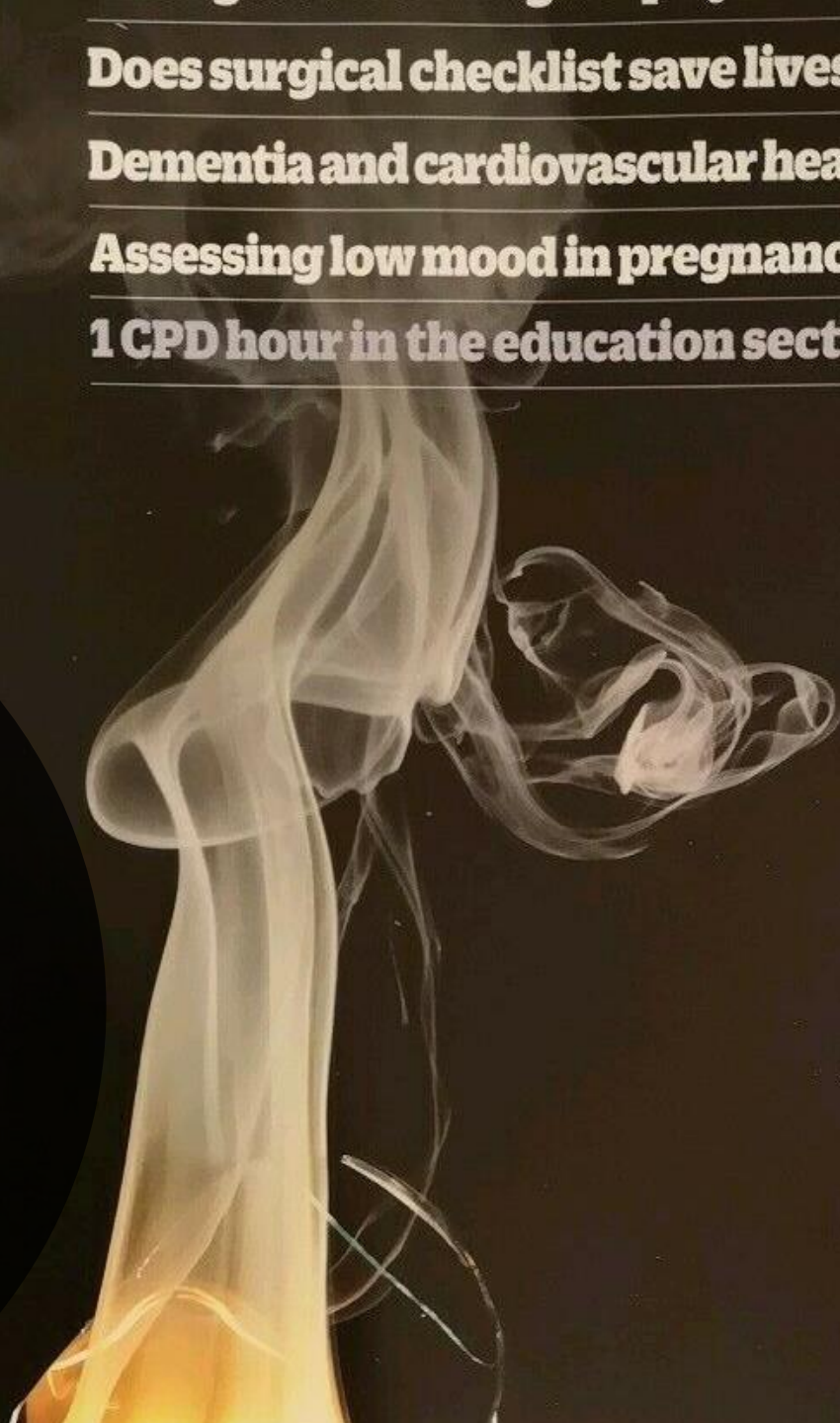
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- **It feels like** an early plantar fasciitis, you know like a heel spur.
  - **It's like** the lining is irritated. The **most common reason** for the lining to be irritated is because of the acid from your stomach.

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# Effects of Uncertainty

## **BURNOUT**

How can  
we protect  
healthcare  
staff?



# Communicating openly about uncertainty

- Improve relationships between clinicians & patients,
- Increase patients' trust and confidence in their clinicians' abilities
- Open avenues for shared decision making
- Improve long term patient outcomes





# Where to for Uncertainty in ED

## Research

- If and how uncertainty is communicated by clinicians in ED? How is it perceived by patients?

## Culture of Openness

- What do they look like?
- Hierarchies & Role models
- Normalise & Support

