

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL OF CLINICAL MEDICINE

Palpitations - GP surgery – simulated patient role 7

Name: Sarah or James Theobald

Age: Your own age

Setting

You are sitting in the waiting room at a GPs' surgery at six thirty in the evening. You rang for an appointment at eight o'clock in the morning to be told that they couldn't fit you in today. Your husband/wife rang back and got rather shirty with the Receptionist. As a result of this 'fuss' being made – which you are not entirely happy about – you were told to come along to evening surgery and wait your turn.

Clinical details

You woke in the early hours with your heart racing ('palpitations') – it was a funny feeling – you felt really odd with it – like when you get very anxious. You could feel your heart going faster and it seemed 'all over the place' – if asked, it was not a regular beat but felt all over the show. You felt sweaty and a little shaky. This continued on and off for 3–4 hours, so you rang your GP at 9.00am.

If asked the right questions, you would say that this has been going on for a while, but haven't told anyone ('don't like to make a fuss'). They first started three months ago but until today have only lasted a few minutes and you have never felt sweaty or dizzy before. They weren't really much to worry about. Admit that you have lost weight lately (say, a stone or so) but you are eating really well.. Also, you have noticed a touch of diarrhoea ('loose you-know-whats'). And you have become more irritable. You have not noticed any shakes or eye problems if asked.

Past medical history

Any previous illnesses: glandular fever when 19, psoriasis (a skin condition which gives you flaky patches on your limbs – you use Dovonex cream when you can be bothered)

Medication

Any medication taken for this: no

Are you on any prescribed drugs such as the pill: no

Family history

Any family history of

heart disease: no

epilepsy: no

Smoking: when stressed

Alcohol: moderate

Social history

You are married

Children: three children (unless your age doesn't fit)

Occupation: postman in village

Where do you live: in a Cambridge village

Type of housing: council house

Social class: working

Temperament

Not known for making a fuss and a little reluctant to give all the information to a young student doctor.

Patient's framework

- **ideas and thoughts**

what did you think might have caused your problem: you don't really know

- **concerns**

what are you concerned about: could it be an age-thing? Heart? Underactive thyroid?

have you any underlying fears: something serious

any practical problems: don't feel able to concentrate, worried about bicycling on rounds

- **expectations**

what are you hoping for: reassurance

do you need anything from the medical staff: the above

- **feelings**

how are you feeling about it all: anxious

- **effect on life**

what effect is this having on your life:

Behaviour

When asked by the student doctor why you have come to the surgery, say something like "Well, it comes and goes really, like your heart is racing"; it asked for more: "I feel all funny. Can't quite describe it - I just feel all over the place - it started in the night and wouldn't go off for hours but thankfully it is fine now so I don't know if I'm making a fuss about nothing."

Clinical Reasoning

Symptoms

- palpitations lasting for 3 to 4 hours
- irregular heart rate
- palpitations associated with feeling sweaty and dizzy
- weight loss
- diarrhoea
- irritability and poor concentration

Palpitations

There are many causes of palpitations including:

- normal variation due to anxiety
- pyrexia from any cause including viral infection
- anaemia
- cardiac causes (arrhythmias such as atrial fibrillation, and myocarditis)

Given the history of sweats, weight loss, diarrhoea and irritability as well as palpitations, the diagnosis of **hyper**thyroidism (or **over**active thyroid) is the most likely. Other symptoms of hyperthyroidism can include heat intolerance, insomnia, light or absent menstrual periods, tremor and hair loss. Hyperthyroidism is caused by the over production of thyroid hormones and there are a number of causes. Severe hyperthyroidism, known as a thyrotoxic storm, is a medical emergency.

Further reading

Look up hyperthyroidism on wikipedia

<http://en.wikipedia/wiki/hyperthyroidism>

on the patient UK website

<http://www.patient.co.uk/doctor/hyperthyroidism>

or the endocrine web at

<http://www.endocrineweb.com>