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Prostate Cancer: is it beyond a joke? Using silly things to make serious points

David Matheson



Background

Like most people, I was born at an early age. I was somewhat smaller at that point than my present 1m83, although I expect that this was something my mother was probably thankful for. Growing up, I outpaced my hair and the edges of my parting waved farewell to each other. Disappointingly, this has never got me a discount at the hairdresser.

I have been involved with diverse forms of education since the last century and involved in medical and healthcare education for most of this one. Besides being Reader in Education for Health at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK, I am an expert patient, having been diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2012, relapsed in 2018, and currently “enjoying” the excitement of every time I wait for the result of a PSA test.

I am patient representative on the STAMPEDE trial, a multi-arm, multi-stage platform trial of therapies for advanced and metastatic prostate cancer, and co-author of various articles from there.

Along with Catherine, my wife, I do voluntary work for various prostate cancer charities in the UK and we do awareness talks about the disease for lay groups and patient educator workshops for professional groups. We also have various research projects on the go with regard to prostate cancer and especially the patient and partner experience. We are parents to three children, grandparents to five and have been making each other laugh for many a year.

The setting: a class of medics learning the basics of how to teach

Some folk sparkle when they talk; some drone; some are lively; and some are dull and dreary. Now, imagine the dreariest voice you can ever imagine, and I mean really dull, dreary and monotone and then also imagine a voice that is quite upbeat (me):

Dreary voice: *I like the way you teach. People relax and they laugh but it makes it all the more memorable.*

Upbeat voice: *That's very kind of you to say so.*

Dreary: *I'd like to introduce humour into my teaching.*

Upbeat: *Are you humoristic on a day-to-day basis?*

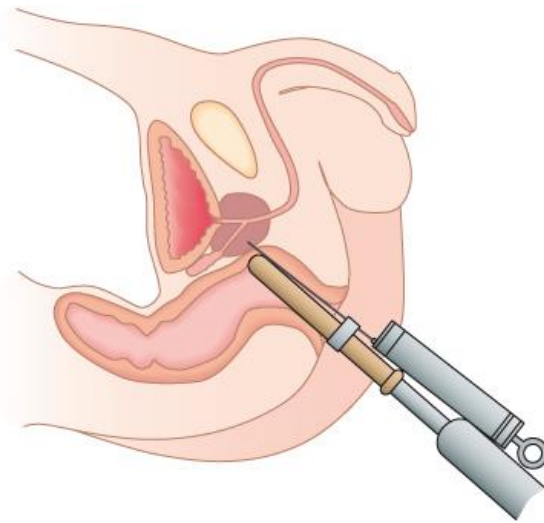
Dreary: *No.*

So, you want to use humour in your teaching?

Then, ask yourself this: “Why?” If the answer is that you like to make people laugh, then think again or maybe seek a career in comedy. If the answer is that you want to use humour to convey serious topics and make them more memorable, then read on and remember that teaching is performance; it is semi-improvisational theatre, with or without audience participation. Like all good performance, practice can make it better, or sometimes just make bad habits harder to change.

It is sometimes said of stand-up comedy that you need to practise until it becomes spontaneous. If something makes you laugh, ask yourself why. If you made an unexpected connection between two things, hang on to it. For example, just how funny is having a transrectal ultrasound-guided biopsy of the prostate? This technique is used to diagnose possible prostate cancer and doesn't exactly seem to sparkle with comedy gold. When I was being investigated for possible prostate cancer in 2012 (and it turned out that I had high-risk locally advanced prostate cancer), I had a TRUS biopsy. I discuss this as part of the patient educator talks that I do for Prostate Cancer UK. Incidentally, you haven't lived until you have done bowel prep: between the purgative and the possible enemas, it's endless fun ... not!

However, when you are going to have someone insert a probe into your rear and then stab through into your prostate, it's a good idea to have it as clean as possible.



From: <https://tackleprostate.org/further-tests-for-prostate-cancer.php>

This was all done quite seriously until one day I was asked what it was like, so I said, *“Have you ever used an electric stapler? You know that **thunk!!!** sound it gives when you use it. It’s just like that.”*



The reaction is surprise and laughter, but it does come on the heels of me presenting a caricature I did of myself whom I describe as *“an ordinary bloke, who was in his fifties at the time of diagnosis.”*



This is the result of realising that to be bald, bearded and wearing glasses is a caricaturist's dream and then attending a one-day cartooning workshop. Compare this with my photo and see how accurate it is...

What I am presenting in these talks is my experience of the disease, its means of diagnosis, my reaction to the treatment and the lasting effects. As a coping mechanism, I try to find something humorous in my experience. I am not seeking to make fun of the disease. That's a critical distinction.

I was told by my oncologist that my hormone-deprivation therapy would be *“like having a menopause...”* I later made an animated GIF of me, wiggly mouthed, with gobs of sweat flying off.



Everyone has the right to find humour in personal, lived experience, but it needs to be done without diminishing it.

Question: *What should I look for in a doctor who's going to do a digital rectal examination on me?*

Answer (the first thing that came into my head): *Thin fingers.*

I was asked at one point what it was like to have a flexible sigmoidoscopy – needed after some serious (well, that's what I thought) rectal bleeding due to radiation enteropathy. "*It's like watching tripe from the inside but with some added polyps and diverticulae.*" It's an image never to be forgotten.

Where are the bounds? Is everything fair game for a laugh?

Some do's and don'ts of teaching with humour

- 1 Make fun of things, not people, unless...
- 2 The person is yourself: you can be sarcastic or ironical with regard to yourself
- 3 Never, ever humiliate anyone, ever, and no put-downs
- 4 Avoid stereotypes – I know you will, but it still needs to be said
- 5 Be aware of cultural differences and be sensitive to them
 - a. Some cultures do irony
 - b. Some do sarcasm
 - c. Some don't
 - d. Be aware of what happens in the culture you're operating in. Every culture has its sensitivities.

Irony = like an iron. Ironical comments can drop like a lump of Fe.

Sleep

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed
Or I'll maybe just go to a lecture instead

With apologies to Shakespeare

Professors: *But, professor, where will the students sleep?*

Groucho: *Where they always sleep. In the classroom.*

Horse Feathers (1932)

There are some people who claim never to have slept in class. I am not one of them. As an undergraduate, I rarely slept so soundly as in a lecture after lunch. Now, are you a teacher who gets upset at students sleeping? I am ever amazed at folk who get wound up over students sleeping in a lecture. Sleeping in lectures is an ancient tradition as you can see in Laurentius de Voltolina's (1350s) *Henricus de Alemannia Lecturing his Students* (Wikipedia Commons/Yorck Project). Notice the guy in the second back row, clearly asleep and nearly falling off the bench.



One day, a colleague accosted me, unhappy at apparent inattention from some students in a lecture for 350 undergrad medical students...

Colleague: *Fourth-year students!!! At least five were asleep right through.*

Me: *What?? Only five out of 350?? What did you do? Electrify the seats?*

If you ever wondered what makes students sleep in a lecture, go find a mirror and have a good look at yourself. There's your answer. Humanity has yet to create a more effective soporific than a lecture. In the very wonderful *Ferris Bueller's day off*, there is a brief scene where an economics teacher discusses aspects of The Great Depression. The "actor" concerned is called Ben Stein. He is an academic economist and the story goes that he was told to teach as he normally would teach. The scene was said to be unscripted. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhiCFdWeQfA> (or, if you can't be bothered copying the URL, just search for *boring economics teacher*) and you will get to judge if you would want to be in his class. I have used this same clip for years, even to the extent that, when the projector failed one day in a class, I could recite the whole thing from memory and do so in my best Ben Stein impersonation. I don't know how good the impersonation was, but the class laughed nonetheless. My follow-up to the clip is to ask who have ever been in a class like that one, whereupon everyone nods, and a few groan. I then ask who would like to be in such a class. Funnily enough, no one!

There are two points here: one about sleeping in class and the other about using other people's humour to illustrate whatever it is that you are teaching. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m80ZQ2YckDI> (a famous scene from the 1954 film *Doctor in the House*) or search for *What's the bleeding time?* and you'll find the clip in question. It is a lovely illustration of many aspects of medicine and I (and others) have used it for years to stimulate discussion. It also raises a laugh, every time.

Still sleeping?

WH Auden: *A professor is a person who talks in someone else's sleep.*

The clue comes from the way that sleeping students waken up as soon as the lecture is finished. Yup, it's your sonorous tones that wafted softly across the room and rocked them gently in the land of Nod. So, what to do?

You can get rattled... not good

You can ignore it ... yeah, but it'll still irritate you, assuming it did so in the first place.

You can prepare the students for sleep, like this:

Now, I know it's right after lunch. Some of you might be feeling a little post-prandial. Goodness knows, I feel that way myself, so if I do doze off, I am depending on the front row to catch me. So, be alert, folks. It'll be tough but I'll do my best to stay with you.

Notice the self-deprecation. This is mockery of self and one's own teaching style. It's using irony and role-reversal as it is students who may be expected to doze off, not the teacher. Take care over the delivery: too serious and some may believe you will actually fall asleep during your own lecture; too relaxed and they won't take you seriously. The challenge is to do dead-pan delivery with a twinkle in your eye or an exaggerated sigh (for example) at the end just to show that you are kidding.

Once upon a time, I was sitting in a colleague's lecture and watched as she fought against those terrible steps on the road to dozing off in an inappropriate place: her eyes slowly closed and then jerked open; her face flushed slightly; she slowly tipped to one side – and me and the other colleagues sat in the front row edged forward in case we had to leap to catch her if she did doze off completely – and jerked back to vertical; she yawned and rubbed her eyes. Now, bear in mind that she was the one doing the lecture! As a group, we met later in the week to discuss how the teaching had been going and how the seminars after the lecture had gone. My sleepy colleague complained that the students found the topic boring! The moral of the story is to only sleep in other people's classes, not your own.

As an alternative to self-deprecation with the potential sleepers, you might try something like this: *Now, sleepers. I have slept through many the lecture and heaven forfend that I might deprive you of the opportunity. But there are some health and safety considerations we need to take into account. First of all, remember that it is only when your face is in contact with wood that saliva becomes an adhesive. So, be aware that you might inadvertently depilate your face when you waken up. Make sure you're secure in your seat and that you don't risk toppling sideways and having your head land on your neighbour's lap. Now, when you wake, check that nobody has tied your shoelaces together. So, get yourselves comfortable; ensure that your head can't tip backwards because there is only one rule in my class for sleepers: NO SNORING.*

I have used this kind of thing with lots of classes when we meet for the first time. The result is howls of laughter and no one noticeably falling asleep. Of course, if, despite all your efforts, too many learners are obviously asleep, you can always do the really evil thing which is to stop talking for a moment. Bearing in mind that your voice is the lullaby, stopping talking will make the sleepers awake and, once awake, they will likely find it hard to fall asleep again. Singing the lecture is another heartless stunt and Gregorian Chant works beautifully for this as you can sing absolutely anything to it. However, do practise beforehand with some nonsense, any nonsense, just to get the feel, the cadence and the intonation and then... go for it.

Keeping them awake and making it memorable

Infotainment is a term of fairly recent vintage. The concept, though, goes back a lot further and can be seen in action in the public lectures which masses of people paid to attend, for example, in 19th century Scotland. These were lectures for public enlightenment. Do you think people would have paid and attended if the lectures had not been entertaining as well as enlightening? Pretty unlikely. And even more unlikely given that there was no qualification attached or even a certificate of attendance. So, what are you doing to entertain your students? Is your evident torpor translating itself into tedium in your delivery? Has your monotone bored itself to death? Do you look at the topic and your heart sinks? Or maybe...

I've taught this same stuff hundreds of times. It's really boring.

This is heart-breaking to hear (note: fake pathos). Indeed, it must be tough to be in your class if this is how you feel but the reality is that you could well find yourself teaching the same clinical skills, for example, multiple times. Here's the thing: you may have done it hundreds of times, but your learners haven't. This may be their only bite at the cherry. So, if you're feeling a bit jaded, what message will they take away? If you are palpably bored, what does that say about the importance of the topic? So, what to do? Answer: perform. Put yourself in the learners' shoes and teach like it was the most important thing in your life. And how do you get lessons in how to do this? Easy. Watch the "news" on the E! channel, because there you will see the most unbelievable trivia presented and discussed as if it were the most important thing in the world. Watch and learn. It's performance but you do need to get into role. If you can do bedside manner, you can do classroom manner and be enthusiastic each and every time you teach. Once you have this skill, you can more readily enthuse with your learners and it is so much easier to laugh with them. Remember also those gags, those puns, those plays on words, those silly anecdotes you've heard yourself say dozens of times: this latest lot of learners have never heard them. Be eco-friendly, recycle! But do it with panache.

Watch others

If you are serious about this teaching with humour malarkey, observe how others do it but remember that they are not you. See what fits with you. See how it is done.

And if it pans...

If your verbal wizardry falls flat? Don't stop; don't explain it; keep going. That is unless you have a follow-up line to mock yourself as a failed comedian. In stand-up, not every joke raises a laugh. Some will, some won't. If the joke fails, keep going like nothing happened. Your class may think you are a bit weird, but is that such a bad thing? Weird is interesting. Weird raises curiosity. If your gags are respectful and not too tangential, they don't have to be side-splitting, but they will catch attention. And remember: *i before e except after c in words with an ee-sound*. Now *that* is weird.

The humour is the hook to make the serious stuff stick. It brings a positive emotion to the learning experience and that makes the material more memorable and, actually, more understandable.

In the end...

Some of us are natural comics. Some are not but can learn to be and some never will. Some can think of a snappy retort immediately. Some never do and others have their moment of witty inspiration long after the moment for delivery has passed. If you visibly enjoy your learners learning and infuse into them your enthusiasm, it will bring its own rewards and your teaching will sparkle with good humour. You may never raise a laugh, but humour will be there. And, if you can't think of a gag, remember this gem of a snappy retort and follow its precept:

Oscar Wilde: *I wish I had said that.*

James McNeill Whistler: *You will, Oscar, you will.*