

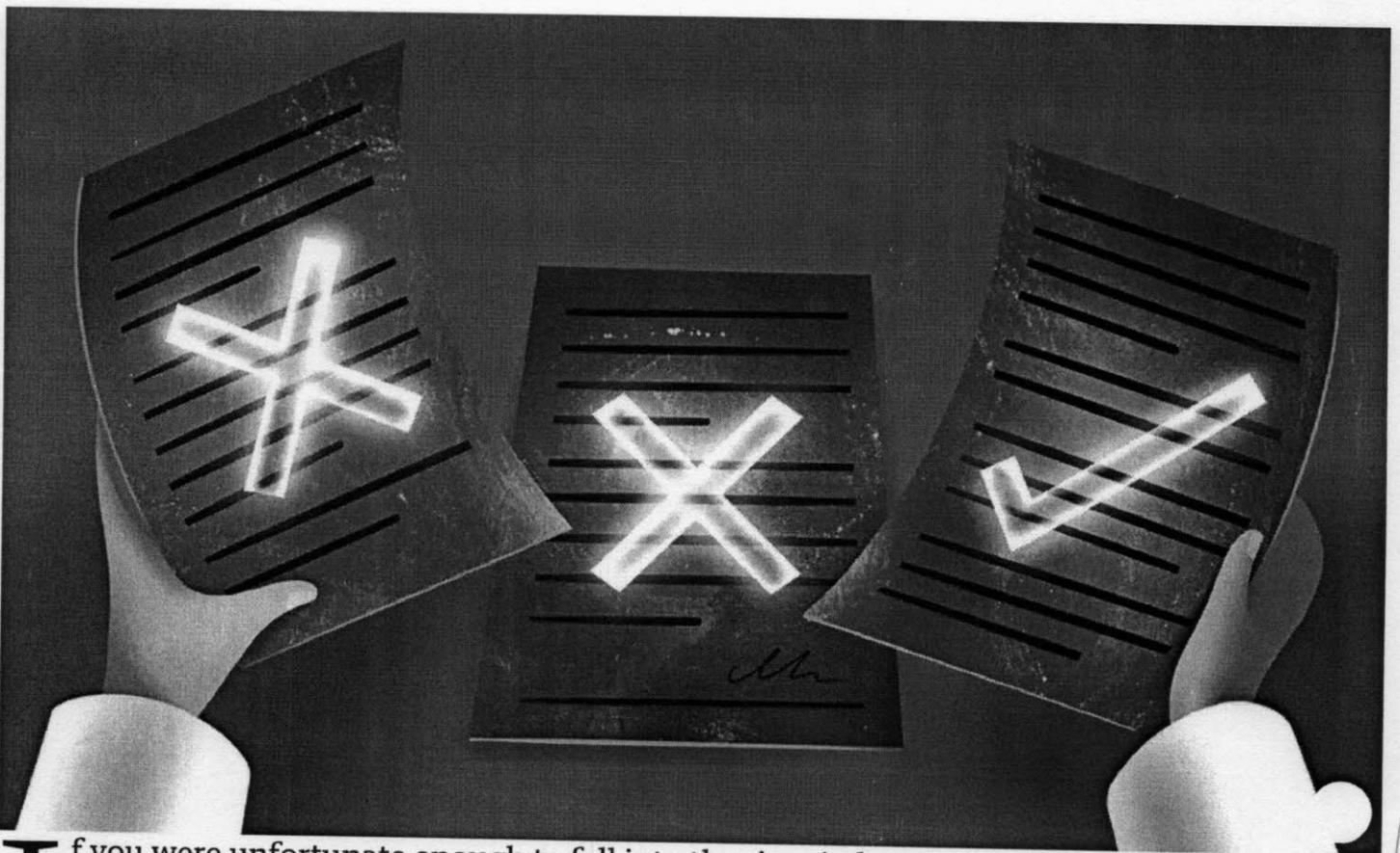
The Guardian

Politicians and doctors both make lethal mistakes
- but doctors own up to theirs

Farrah Jarral

Government decisions on Covid have cost lives. We urgently need a political culture in which people admit their errors

Thu 20 Aug 2020 07.00 BST



If you were unfortunate enough to fall into the river in late 18th-century London, you might have found yourself experiencing medical treatment that would raise eyebrows today. Resuscitation kits, paid for by the Royal Humane Society, which was founded in 1774 as the Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned, involved quite literally blowing tobacco smoke inside the rectums of drowning victims. Beautiful examples of these devices this can still be found, in wooden cases complete with leather bellows and finely crafted ivory nozzles, including one in the Wellcome Collection on London's Euston Road.

When I teach 21st-century medical students I ask them to have a look at this Georgian equivalent of a defibrillator while visualising the portraits of the dignified doctors that decorate the walls of the Royal College of Physicians. I don't need to tell you that the smoke-enema technique did not work, but it took years for these resuscitation kits to fall out of favour. Showing these objects to medical students can be remarkably effective at deflating the

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hubris that still characterises our profession. What is gold-standard medical practice one day may become obsolete and even absurd the next.

Despite medicine's chequered history when it comes to saving lives - the Royal College admits that some doctors of the past "almost certainly killed as many patients as they cured" - the profession has experienced a transformation in attitudes over the past few decades that other fields would do well to emulate. Admitting error on an individual and institutional level is an essential and formally enshrined aspect of modern medicine in the UK.

Things aren't perfect in British medicine. We still see shocking cover-ups, scapegoating and the appalling treatment of whistleblowers in the NHS, but the profession is moving in the right direction, shaped by the expectation of transparency and accountability for all. Today, particularly in our political sphere, these norms seem to be in need of renewed emphasis.

Medicine and aviation are among the most "safety-critical" industries. In both professions, the most dangerous practitioners are those who do not admit their mistakes, or who are dishonest about the limits of their knowledge. Practical measures such as checklists can reduce errors in cockpits and operating theatres alike, but less tangible aspects of organisational behaviour are no less important. Addressing rigid social hierarchies that stop people from speaking up when things go wrong, or focusing on learning and not blame are equally crucial to avoiding harm.

It is easy to see how airline pilots and doctors can kill or maim people when they screw up, but politicians can cause the same harms too, and on a potentially vast scale. We urgently need a political culture in which people admit mistakes, apologise properly and investigate errors thoroughly to prevent them from recurring. Instead, the standard offerings from our politicians are a carousel of barefaced lies, pseudo apologies and relentless bluffing.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought the lethal consequences of politicians' poor behaviour into focus. As the GP and former MP Sarah Wollaston recently tweeted, "Doctors & nurses are expected to be open about mistakes & show they have learnt from them", yet the example set from ministers is "never accept you have got it wrong, never apologise & just blame others". The errors of Boris Johnson's government, as Wollaston noted, have "cost lives; England has the highest number of excess deaths in Europe". The fact that political decisions can destroy millions of lives is not a new revelation. Academic analysis of the consequences of austerity has shown serious adverse health outcomes in the UK, including increased rates of suicide and faltering life expectancy.

Medicine, like any field, is not immune from sleaze. Not even a peer-reviewed randomised controlled trial published in a top journal is completely neutral. Drug companies bankroll much scientific research, and there is still no legal requirement for doctors to publicly declare their financial links with the pharmaceutical industry, for example. However, in principle at least, the concepts of probity, evidence-based decision-making and candour around mistakes are central to ethical medical practice in the UK.

While doctors are rightly expected to be honest straight-talkers, politicians seem to be rewarded, or at least tolerated, for their glib performances, even when they are evidently riddled with lies. But this apparent difference buckles under examination. The contemporary focus on consumer satisfaction means you can rate your clinician like you'd rate a pizzeria, and the basis for that score can be superficial or unsound. And as most of us are aware, a doctor who is smooth-talking, acquiescent and gives the impression of being flawless is not necessarily a safe and competent pair of medical hands. (Harold Shipman, Britain's most prolific serial killer, was popular with his patients - but his case did catalyse significant reforms in the way that doctors are regulated.)

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Could it be that we fall for the appearance of infallibility? It would certainly seem so in our politicians. Rightwing populists and “strongmen” have been winning votes around the world. Donald Trump’s recent interview with Jonathan Swan of Axios demonstrated the exhausting volume of falsehoods he excretes - more than 17 over 35 minutes. Yet his approval ratings remain stable. It appears to be routine now for politicians to bludgeon us with reflex denial, defensiveness and insulting soundbites on a loop, even when dealing with the most urgent and life-threatening issues. They seem never to resign or apologise these days, however heinous or ridiculous their mistakes and lies.

The very concept of “electability” is tied to perceptions of success that are rooted in a deeply classist society which promotes intellectually mediocre, morally bankrupt posh boys to the highest offices in the country. Part of their political performance is an astonishing resistance to self-reflection, or any awareness of the serious consequences their actions have for others. Weaning ourselves off this tendency to accept form over function in politics is a medicine worth taking, in the hope of a future where transparency, scrutiny and accountability are not just the concern of those who fly planes and treat patients, but also a priority for the leaders whose actions put all our lives at risk.

. Farrah Jarral is a broadcaster and doctor

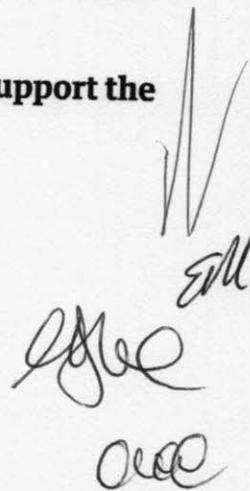
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The Guardian



'My world came crashing down': how 2020 took me from a six-figure salary to universal credit

When I was made redundant, I thought I would easily get another great job. Then the pandemic hit ...

Claire Smith

Wed 19 Aug 2020 10.30 BST

It was while I was on the phone to my closest friend that my world came crashing down. As I distractedly read an email while we chatted, the reality I had been holding at bay with a combination of denial and optimism could no longer be ignored. The bank was letting me know the loan and credit card payment holidays I had taken at the beginning of lockdown were coming to an end.

In six weeks I would run out of money. Not just low on money, but out of money, credit and options. No income, no way of paying my bills, no way of buying food, nothing.

As I took it in I became light-headed. "You still there?" my friend asked. All my well-honed acting and pretending to be fine collapsed as I said: "No, I don't think I am." Through sobs, I told the truth about my financial situation for the first time.

My whole life, my friends and I had laughed about what we called my "bag lady complex". Having been brought up in a working-class family where money was tight, I was always

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concerned that everything might one day be taken away from me. Now, at the age of 45, it looked as if that might become a reality.

Less than a year ago, my life seemed pretty sorted. I was earning a six-figure salary in HR, I had a wonderful home in the country and a large group of friends. I was a keen traveller and hiker. I thought I was living the dream.

I took redundancy from that job in November 2019. I was relaxed about it and comfortable with the intention of doing some writing and consultancy work for a few months while looking for a new role. A long period of illness a few years earlier had cleared out my savings and left me with some credit card debt, but with the redundancy payment and no dependents other than a dog, I knew I had the skills and experience to support myself. And in February, I was shortlisted for another job.

Then coronavirus came along. I have elderly parents and an older brother with a number of complex health issues who live a considerable distance away, so my focus turned there. When not racked with anxiety about them and the fact that at times it felt as if the world might be ending, I took the opportunity to be at home and be creative, which I had not had much time to do. I was a writer and a painter in my youth but, with what now seems like supreme irony, I had given up those pursuits due to my "bag lady complex" and the need to earn enough money to feel secure in life.

At the beginning of March, I was informed that the role I had been shortlisted for had been pulled due to the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic. I was unsurprised. I felt the flickers of concern, but was still hopeful that a) things would get "back to normal" soon and b) I could survive financially until July. I put the fear to one side and fell back on what now feels like the glib and naive mantra: "Something will turn up."

Over the next few months, I watched as the bottom fell out of the job market in my field, but kept busy in lockdown: walking the dog (a rescue collie, the light of my life), painting, writing and tutoring my godchildren via Zoom to give their frazzled parents a break every day. The friends I told - and I have chosen them carefully - were a huge support while, I suspect, being very grateful it wasn't them. I found I was unable to sit down for long enough to watch TV, so instead listened to endless true-crime podcasts; the stories they told about the many ways lives can go wrong made me feel like my life was less of a car crash.

Knowing that I fell between the cracks of any government support, not having been self-employed for long enough to qualify for a grant, I kept a close eye on my finances and took advantage of payment holidays where I could. As time passed from one month, to two and three, I started to have restless nights and suffer from nightmares, but remained in denial during my waking hours. Until the moment I received the email from my bank, I had effectively been acting as though lockdown was a giant pause button on life.

That email forced me to take stock. My funds were now so low that I did something that would have seemed inconceivable to the person I was last year: I applied for universal credit.

I was blindsided by the physical impact the process had on me. I noticed that my hands were shaking as I completed the questions online and I felt physically sick as I received the email to let me know that "Jane" would be calling me on Monday to verify the details of my application. I imagined she would speak to me with disdain. I am relieved to report that, while I found the whole conversation mortifying, she did not. In fact, noticing my voice cracking as I told her about my situation, Jane said: "Please don't worry - we've had lots of calls like yours."

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In early July, I saw an advert for a role at my level of experience - the first in months. It was based hundreds of miles away from where I live, but it represented hope and I applied immediately. About 250 people had got there before me. I have also applied for a number of entry-level roles, one of which 590 people have also applied for. These numbers are no longer unusual. As yet, three weeks on, I have heard back from three of the 12 roles I've applied for so far, all "thanks but no thanks" responses. I have started to sell many of my - what now seem completely pointless - possessions on eBay: clothes, designer handbags, shoes ... Selling my home is not an option, since I rent.

Like many others, I'm sure, all this has caused me to think hard about my life, my identity and what I consider to be success. The result has been a process of grieving - for the person I was, for the decisions I've made and for living what now seems like a very materialistic way of life. There are good days and bad. On the good, I apply for every job I can and work on writing the novel I started at the beginning of lockdown. On the bad, I curl up under the duvet. I take medication for anxiety and depression to keep the really dark thoughts at bay.

I've noticed I cry at the drop of a hat, particularly for other people's losses and pain in a way I was too self-centred to do before. I have found myself sobbing uncontrollably while reading about Caroline Flack and her family, the killing of Breonna Taylor and the loss of the writer Joanna Cannon's dog Seth. Life has become more simple by necessity. I take joy from different things, mainly books, and my dog, who is my constant companion through all of this and is so happy I am at home all the time. My friendships with the handful of people I have told have deepened and feel more authentic and closer than before. I still haven't told my parents (which is why I'm writing this piece under a pseudonym). The past few months have taken enough of a toll on them without having to worry about this, too.

I am also in the process of re-evaluating my treatment of others while working in HR. If I ever have a senior role in the sector again, a prospect that seems increasingly unlikely, I hope I don't lose the empathy and humility that have come from this experience. I have always thought of myself as a compassionate person, but I now look back and know I used to make decisions without really considering what I was doing to others' lives and their sense of self.

My next step is to contact a debt management charity, though the thought makes me feel I might pass out. I am on tenterhooks for the next two weeks to see whether I get any job interviews and/or am awarded a universal credit payment. That decision is made five weeks after you have made your claim. If all I get is universal credit, it will be nowhere near enough to cover my outgoings, as lean as I have managed to make them. The articles I have read about the cruelty and inadequacy of the benefits system have been brought into sharp focus.

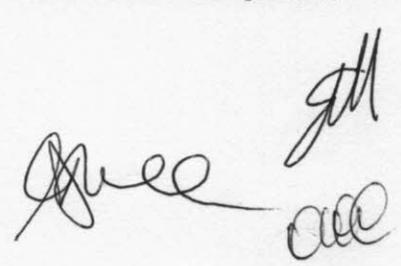
If I don't even get that, I don't know what I am going to do. I suspect I am not the only one.

Claire Smith is a pseudonym. Some minor identifying details have been changed.

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.

Topics

- Money
- Employee benefits
- Work & careers
- Coronavirus outbreak

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