

Health Profilers: Is that a reflection in the Mirror Neurons?

Philip Maffetone

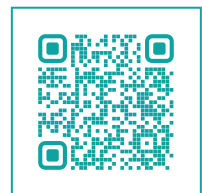
Health profiling

Looking at a stranger can create an odd sense of recognition, a feeling that we know, like, or fear them, despite having never met. Treating patients is very similar. Although every patient is a stranger at first, studies show that up to 90% of diagnoses are reached via history and physical exam alone. This traditional approach is often superior to high-tech diagnostic tools; we are all capable of complex deduction and effective communication.

Holistic assessments offer a detailed, personalised view of a patient's health by focusing on more than just symptoms. This comprehensive approach can be described as health profiling. The intellectual, intuitive, and innate ability to be effective natural health profilers is a skill developed by our earliest ancestors, who used it for survival, from avoiding dangerous beasts to communicating with other humans and finding a mate. Health practitioners have likely engaged in patient profiling since before the time of Hippocrates.

George Goodheart was fond of saying, both while lecturing and at the dinner table, '*Listen carefully to what the patient says, then carefully forget it*'. He was one of the best profilers I've ever met. Another favourite is the 18th Century philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose ethical theory was to never treat people merely as a means to an end. This principle was championed by physician Sir William Osler, who said, '*Never treat a stranger*'. I never met either of them, but I embrace their writings.

... Restoring a simple routine, greeting the patient, watching them stand, and observing their gait walking down the hall, resolved the problem ...'



Long before confronting a real patient, these ideas were crucial to me. Reading about them in textbooks and journals, and studying them in philosophy, biology, and clinical diagnosis, I had yet to truly experience them. Finally, new in practice, it was evident: I didn't learn enough from what patients wrote on their intake forms, nor from what they said about their problems. In fact, the two often clashed. Instead, getting to know each individual clinically, one-on-one, brain-to-brain, was far more valuable.

Our brain's mirror neurons play a crucial role in learning about others through observation, facilitating imitation and empathy. While this may be why yawning is contagious, mirror neurons are fundamental to social interaction, development, and supporting better health outcomes. Interestingly, and despite the name, these brain cells don't necessarily require vision; our other senses are capable of accomplishing the same.

Mirror neurons facilitate nonverbal communication through behaviours, gestures, and posture, often before a word is spoken. Two people create a shared neural representation through their presence. When observing a patient move, these neurons fire as if you are performing the same actions, allowing for the simulation of intentions, emotions, and nonverbal cues. What better way to understand how someone feels?

Our actions, of course, are initiated by the brain's motor cortex, which triggers muscle contraction, leading to movement in the bony spine, pelvis, arms, and legs. The head appears to lead the way, while the joints, of which we have almost one for each day of the year, are guided by muscles that help manage movement by sending moment-to-moment updates back to the brain. Mirror neurons allow us to 'see' another's actions as if we were inside a fine timepiece. It is a neurological play with various actors following specific roles; when the physiological players join in, everyone dances. Shakespeare was right: All the world's a stage.

Our brains are us

This process not only gave me a much better sense of the patient I was attempting to assess, but they discovered more about me as well. It's a two-way relationship (even though I'm the only one being paid).

As my practice grew, I one day, unexpectedly, lost sight of this symphony of brain-body, bidirectional focus; I was being blinded from my own patients. As my assistant now escorted patients directly to the exam rooms, it became apparent that I had missed a crucial, initial patient interaction. Realising that a key assessment step was missing, I immediately reinstated our previous procedures.

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Working with elite athletes became an even more intriguing, yet different experience. It felt like I was required to wear a fitness profiler's black hat and tie, like a uniquely sophisticated companion of a health profiler. The addition of time outside the clinic, observing runners on tracks, road cyclists, and tennis players, made the assessment challenge even higher. Many athletes appeared to have perfect techniques, great gaits, and swift, flowing movements. So why did they have pain? Their imbalances were highly compensated for and much more subtle than those found in people who perform the same activities with less skill.

Watching, waiting, and looking deeper into that apparent abyss is how it becomes clear: those imbalances are there for discovery, just more hidden away, and they can still cause big problems.

Today, the foundation of our intelligence is more essential than ever, yet it is waning. While we still possess natural, innate instinct, my recent paper on brain health showed that over 80% of the world's people have unhealthy brains.

Has an unthinking population embraced the myth that we are being taken over by artificial intelligence? In reality, the greater risk is that artificial food is literally shrinking and impairing our brains.

While true artificial consciousness does not exist, the current super-technologies referred to as AI are mere companions to other high-tech healthcare assessment tools which continue replacing our natural intelligence, because we allow it.

Society pushes us to anthropomorphise these systems, attributing human traits to non-human entities. While we risk abandoning our own logic, common sense, and ability to communicate with each other, we continue creating tools that make life easier. This will not replace our natural ability to assess and treat patients properly, unless we allow it.

Conclusion

The next time you look at a stranger, you may see a reflection of yourself in the patient. It could quickly trigger a profound, momentary, and perhaps forgotten sense of shared humanity. So let's be better, more compassionate observers, to ourselves and to each other.

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