Twelve years ago, I was introduced to a dynamic doctor, an immunologist, Associate Professor Glenn Reeves, who carries all these qualities into his medical practice and patient care programs. In our first meeting I was struck by how Glenn spoke so passionately about his love of immunology and his desire to help people living with autoimmune illness. In particular, he desired to work with them to help them manage their symptoms and find a way together to meet shared health and life goals. Patient needs were a strong and consistent focus.

I have since learnt that Glenn didn’t always have his heart connected so solidly to Immunology, having once sported with the idea of becoming a surgeon. However, after exploring ‘Harrison’s textbook of medicine’, the immunology seed was planted. His medical career changed its path to focus on the study of the immune system through clinical and research activities.

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The field of immunology looks at the building blocks of the immune system, which is designed to defend the body in both health and disease from harmful organisms such as viruses, bacteria and parasites. The integrity of the immune system is crucial for the survival of every individual organism. It is complex, and it is this complexity and the numerous challenges it presents that attracted Glenn to this field of study.

On any given week day and many weekend days, Glenn’s life is dedicated to the service of people who come to him for medical support and guidance. His own belief is that physicians place their knowledge and skills at the service of patients to diagnose and ameliorate illness, and that patients are active drivers in the therapeutic encounter by clearly communicating their health and life goals, their fears, unambiguous expressions of their expectations and hopes as well as their treatment preferences. The physician’s role is to help foster a positive relationship which has the patient at its core, guiding and advising with a sound knowledge base encouraging the best possible health outcome.
In dealing with people living with chronic illnesses such as autoimmune illness, the physician and patient need to develop a health relationship built on the qualities of the Hippocratic Oath whilst dealing with complex and fluctuating health symptoms that can impact heavily on the physical, emotional and spiritual essence of the individual. This relationship needs to foster a holistic approach to patient wellbeing. Glenn, like many doctors, does this on a daily basis and sometimes without regard for his own wellbeing. Which begs to ask the question, who cares for the carer?

Glenn maintains a busy and hectic schedule trying to strike an acceptable balance between a restorative and happy private life and a demanding public life practising medicine. His time-management challenges have been well known to colleagues, family and patients. In reflection on finding an acceptable work-life efficiency plan, Glenn admits that “his past digressions and transgressions have taught him the hard way”. He struggles to apply self-discipline and to simply enjoy the space and the animals that choose to go against the normal routine. Sandy, all the dogs and I pile into the car at the end of a busy week and head north to the Newcastle Director of Coastal Immunology, Conjoint with University of Newcastle.

During interviewing Glenn for this article, we laughed about painting an image of him living the gentrified life sitting at the manor house on the farm in a velvet smoking jacket, a glass of red in one hand and a pipe in the other. Yet the reality is that Glenn does not need or do frills and fancy and is more at home in a comfortable pair of jeans, and his favourite superman t-shirt, mowing a path down to the creek with the old tractor that came with the farm.

Glenn describes time on the farm as “a time to relax and go against the normal routine. Sandy, all the dogs and I pile into the car at the end of a busy week and head north to the farm for a few days of walking or kayaking in the dam, fixing a fence, planting trees or simply sitting and looking at the space around. It grounds you, it helps you to make sense of the world and all that you do.” He adds, “Eventually we will have more animals and a barn, but for now we are happy simply to enjoy the space and the animals that choose to spend time with us.”

Quiet, restorative space can be found in many different environments and activities and Glenn has since his teenage years found great joy in reading, philosophy, theology and political texts, and teachings. He is a man with Universalist tendencies, is fascinated by all cultures and has a great interest in spiritual and philosophical connections. Those that are lucky enough to spend some time with Glenn will be taken with his ability to connect with them as a unique individual. From the first day we met, he has shown great empathy and compassion for all people regardless of whether they touch his professional life as an Immunologist, or his personal life.

Not all doctors are created equal and it can be difficult to find someone that is able to connect with each of their patients, working with them to reach their personal health goals. It can be even more difficult to do this with patient expectations and medical reality, managing illness symptoms and treatments to prevent long-term adverse health outcomes. It can be even more difficult to do this with reference to informed quality-of-life needs of the individual living daily with autoimmune illness or any chronic illness. But this is what a ‘good doctor’ tries to do. A ‘good doctor’ invests in the ongoing health and wellbeing of each person that entrusts them with their managed care, and for many, Glenn is more than a ‘good doctor’ he is an Associate Professor Senior Staff Specialist of HNELHD, Medical Director of the Autoimmune Resource and Research Centre, Director of Coastal Immunology, Conjoint with University of Newcastle.

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