

Opinion: Curing social ills will help fix physical pain

By Laura Gottlieb

I had known and adored Jeremy's family for several years. So when the sandy-haired, good-natured 8-year-old came to see me in my clinic with abdominal pain, I bent over backward to find out why his tummy hurt. I poked and prodded; did tests of his urine, stool and blood; and took X-rays, over the course of several months. When those tests came back normal, I did more. I had trained at a top medical school and gone on to one of the best residencies in my specialty; in Jeremy, I thought I had identified a real clinical mystery. But in the end, the mystery was not a best-seller: It turned out that Jeremy's family couldn't afford to buy food.

It had never even occurred to me to ask his mother about how much food there was in the house.

In Jeremy's case, I had diagnosed "abdominal pain" when the real problem was hunger; I confused social issues with medical problems in other patients, too. I mislabeled the hopelessness of long-term unemployment as depression and the poverty that causes patients to miss pills or appointments as noncompliance. In one older patient, I mistook the inability to read for dementia. My medical training had not prepared me for this ambush of social circumstance.

Read the whole story

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