

THE DECISION TRAP - REVIEW

There was a time, not many decades ago, when a visit to the doctor involved presentation of a symptom, an appropriate examination and/or test and a clear diagnosis, positive or negative. The doctor was in charge and offered a form of care that today would be labelled as paternalistic. But all this has changed as Silja Samerski's short and lucid book reveals. Patients have become empowered relative to their medical attendants and now need treating as partners in the medical game: but at what cost?

Through close examination of a series of consultations, Samerski identifies the 'decision trap' into which patients inevitably fall. As the counsellor or doctor describes the risk factors, particularly genetic, surrounding future medical events the patient is invited to become fully informed. Yet, as Samerski cogently argues, this newly empowered status is an illusion: the patient can never know their destiny with any certainty but instead enters a future that is reconstructed as a series of probabilities. In effect, a future that for a pregnant woman at least might have been characterised as having 'good hope' becomes entangled in a web of risks from which there is no escape.

Can this decision trap – choosing between whether to have further tests and procedures as the patient digs themselves further into the world of constraining probabilities – be avoided? Patients are not even allowed to say no: instead they are required to reach an 'informed' no. If they want the test that will show the risks to themselves or their baby they can open the door and enter the trap; but if they don't want the test that too is a choice so they still must know what they are rejecting and the risks associated with it.

We have therefore entered a strange world in which those moral imperatives of choice and being fully informed constitute a spider's web, a decision trap, from which it is impossible to escape. At one level it is so obvious what has happened but sometimes the obvious needs pointing out and this short book does it economically and clearly. In the end Samerski offers the hope that human courage will enable us to involve avoid this decision trap; but I suspect this statement has not been made from a fully informed perspective.

David Armstrong

Professor of Medicine and Sociology

King's College London