change from infectious to more chronic degenerative ones. Infections remain among the commonest causes of premature mortality in South Asia, and the impact of HIV and AIDS may delay the epidemiological transition. Sound governmental policies, especially adequate investments in female education and public health systems, can bring about a rapid decrease in the burden of infectious diseases in the rest of South Asia, as shown by Sri Lanka.

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A memorable patient

Spiritual relief

As healthcare professionals, we regularly encounter complex decision making with regard to patient consent. While working as a volunteer doctor in a Tibetan hospital in northern India, I came across an unusual example of difficulty gaining consent.

An elderly monk presented with a sharp thoracic back pain of sudden onset and shortness of breath. A chest radiograph revealed a large pneumothorax. This was aspirated successfully, but recurred the following day. We discussed the need for a chest drain, but the monk withheld consent, as he felt he was close to death and did not want any invasive procedures performed.

After further discussion, he conceded that he would only consent to such treatment if he could obtain a "divination" from His Holiness the Dalai Lama; it is local practice for Tibetans occasionally to seek advice and guidance from their spiritual leader. Consequently, although he remained in respiratory distress, a postal request was made for a divination. Ten hours later, the

divination was obtained, and a chest drain was inserted without complication.

This was a particularly unusual example of consent by proxy and emphasises the need to consider patients' cultural and spiritual beliefs when obtaining consent.

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We welcome articles up to 600 words on topics such as *A memorable patient*, *A paper that changed my practice*, *My most unfortunate mistake*, or any other piece conveying instruction, pathos, or humour. Please submit the article on <http://submit.bmj.com>. Permission is needed from the patient or a relative if an identifiable patient is referred to. We also welcome contributions for "Endpieces," consisting of quotations of up to 80 words (but most are considerably shorter) from any source, ancient or modern, which have appealed to the reader.