modifiers. A previous study, using a similar design with patients who had back pain, seemed to indicate that preferences did not increase or dilute quality of life treatment effects.¹⁵

Conclusion

In this non-inferiority trial, we failed to show clearly that the brief intervention for patients with neck pain was as effective as usual physiotherapy. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in improvement contains the value of 1.2, which indicates some evidence of inferiority of the brief intervention compared with usual physiotherapy. However, as the confidence interval is not entirely above this threshold, some may argue that there is a role for the brief intervention for all patients. It seems that the brief intervention should in any case be available for those who prefer it.

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A memorable mistake

None so blind

"Och aye, Freddy. Men make mistakes, not because they don't know but because they don't look." This was said to me in 1942 by my late friend Sandy Bell, quoting his professor of medicine at Queen's University, Belfast.

Years later, in the early 1960s, my wife and I were travelling in the high Andes of Peru. We had gone up to Cuzco to see our daughter, who was on voluntary service teaching English at the university there. While there, we were offered a trip into the surrounding countryside by Hugo—a tough, handsome truck driver, part Quechua Indian, part Basque—who was taking a load of potatoes to sell.

He had promised us an afternoon outing, but in fact only returned to Cuzco a week later. In the meantime, we ate and slept in the cab of the huge Dodge lorry, with Hugo selling his potatoes by day and driving the precipitous roads by night. These hair raising nocturnal journeys were made more hazardous by an unexpected medical problem.

Hugo had a large adhesive dressing on his forehead. He had recently been attacked by three young men, who had hurled a rock through the lorry windscreen in an attempt to rob him. However, Hugo had successfully fought them off, head butting the gang leader (hence the dressing on his forehead) and

knocking out the other two. To some mild surprise, the gang leader turned out to be the son of the local president of police, and so the attempted robbery with violence was deemed a mere youthful prank, a new windscreen was paid for, and the matter was quietly forgotten.

Hugo had thought the injury to his forehead no more than a minor abrasion and had dressed it himself. To his and my surprise, however, his forehead swelled intermittently and dramatically during our week long trip. The oedema almost closed his eyes, but fortunately I found a bottle of penicillin tablets in my pocket, and these kept the swelling in check. I did not remove the dressing because I had none to replace it with.

When we finally returned to Cuzco, after crossing swollen rivers on partly destroyed bridges, I was able to remove Hugo's dressing, and all was revealed. Firmly embedded in his forehead were two human incisors—mementos left by his would be robber.

"Och aye, Freddy. Men make mistakes, not because they don't know but because they don't look."

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