Activity 1 - ‘Acute’ medicine in general practice

Doctors use the words ‘acute’ and ‘chronic’ rather differently from the general population. In medical terms an ‘acute’ illness is one that comes on (and hopefully goes away) rather quickly, rather than being a particularly bad illness.

A ‘chronic’ illness is one that hangs around for a long time rather than necessarily being a particularly awful one. These are also known as long term conditions. A heart attack or a cold are examples of acute illnesses, whereas arthritis or acne are chronic illnesses (if you have suffered with acne you might feel it is chronic in the medical and non-medical senses of the word).

GPs see a lot of patients with acute illnesses and with increasingly good tests and treatments GPs are better than ever equipped to make accurate diagnoses and treat patients effectively.

But it is not always easy for a GP to tell when a patient is really ‘ill’. There are two reasons for this.

Firstly patients may feel ‘ill’ even if they don’t appear to have a proper ‘illness’.

Doctors differentiate between ‘Disease’ and ‘Illness’. Illness is what the patient sees the doctor about; Disease is what the doctor diagnoses.

Questions to consider

Can you think of situations when a patient might have an Illness with no Disease?

Can you think of a situation in which a patient has a Disease but no Illness?
Secondly GPs may see patients very early on in the course of their illness – when their symptoms are still not very clear. Consider a child with a temperature. Most of the time this will be due to a simple virus infection and will just get better – a ‘Blue Line’ illness in the graph below. But just occasionally it will be the start of something much more serious like Meningitis that will get worse unless it is treated urgently – a ‘Red Line’ illness on the graph. Early on when the GP sees the patient it may be impossible to tell if this is a red line or a blue line illness – although this may be very obvious a few hours later.

![Graph showing blue and red lines representing symptoms over time](image)

One issue that has been discussed a lot in the media over recent years is the importance of early diagnosis of cancer. We know that the earlier you diagnose cancer the easier it is to cure, but detecting it early when symptoms may be very subtle can be very difficult. There are different types of tests for different types of cancer and there is no single test that will detect all cancers. Finding ways to make it easier for GPs to detect serious illnesses like cancer very early on is an important challenge for the future.

**Questions to consider**

- Why can’t everyone be tested for cancer regularly?
- Are there other ways to reduce the number of people developing cancer in the UK?