

Who is the patient?

You are surprised to receive a call for an urgent home visit from James Browne. Your receptionist says that he was very demanding and rude and she almost hung up on him, but was worried he might be really ill. You look at his notes which reveal only that you have not seen him since he registered at the practice 2 years ago. You note that his address is the penthouse of a very expensive apartment block in an exclusive gated community.

On arrival at the flat, and having finally penetrated the security system, you discover that James has called you because his girlfriend, Maisie, has collapsed. Resisting the urge to point out that she is not actually your patient, you examine her. Her breathing is slow, but regular, her skin is clammy and very pale and she has clearly vomited before passing out. It is difficult to rouse her. You ask James about her use of alcohol and other drugs. He denies that they have used any drugs, but comments scornfully that she clearly can't hold her drink – she only had a couple of bottles of wine and a few chasers. You clear the last traces of vomit from her mouth, place her in the recovery position and call an ambulance. She needs hospital treatment.

You ask to wash your hands and notice a couple of empty single malt whisky bottles on the washstand. On your way back to the living room, you lose your way and find yourself in the kitchen where you see at least another dozen empty whisky bottles by the bin and several full ones on the worktop. Whilst waiting for the ambulance you take the opportunity to talk to James about his own drinking habits. He immediately becomes angry with you and tells you he can stop when he likes, he never misses work and his social life is none of your business. You look at him more carefully and notice his eyes and skin look a yellowish colour and that, for someone so obviously wealthy, he looks a bit thin and generally unwell. You ask a few more questions and get increasingly expletive-ridden responses. Thinking through your options, you suggest that James might like to come to the surgery for a general health check and maybe a few blood tests, just for your records. At that point, the ambulance arrives for Maisie. Leaving with the ambulance, you wonder if James will come to the surgery and ponder what the future might hold for him if he doesn't.

Mentor notes

Hopefully students will appreciate that this case is about alcohol abuse and the effects of alcohol poisoning, both acute and chronic. However, as well as the pathophysiology of alcohol misuse, there are a lot of other things they can explore.

Students should focus on the case of Maisie.

Here are some suggested learning objectives for **Maisie**:

1. Describe the pathophysiology of acute and chronic alcohol poisoning and relate them to the signs and symptoms exhibited by Maisie and James
2. Describe the treatment which Maisie is likely to receive in hospital
3. Summarise the responsibilities of a GP towards someone who is not one of their registered patients

Maisie

Maisie has clearly been binge drinking. Students are likely to be aware of the issues around public disorder and the other social issues arising from binge drinking because the media are full of it, but may be less aware that a lot of alcohol abuse takes place unseen in private.

The Mayo Clinic has a very good website on alcohol poisoning at <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alcohol-poisoning/basics/definition/con-20029020> including the short- and long-term effects and treatment, as does the NHS website at <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/alcohol-poisoning/Pages/Treatment.aspx>

Provided this is a one-off occasion and that she has not inhaled any vomit, Maisie is unlikely to suffer any long term effects. She will be rehydrated at the hospital and monitored until she is sufficiently recovered to go home.

GPs duty of care

The doctor does have a duty to treat Maisie, even though she is not his/her patient, because it's an emergency.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/healthcare/nhs-healthcare/nhs-patients-rights/#h-treatment-from-a-gp>

<http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/doctors/Pages/NHSGPs.aspx>

However, s/he has no obligation to manage any long term treatment Maisie may require.