



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 James.

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

1. Describe the pathophysiology of acute and chronic alcohol poisoning and relate them to the signs and symptoms exhibited by Maisie and James
2. Summarise what blood tests the doctor would like to organise for James and what they might show
3. Summarise the most likely long-term prognosis for James if he doesn't modify his behaviour
4. Explain to James why you are concerned about his health and persuade him to visit the surgery
5. Explore the options open to a doctor when a patient resists medical care

James

James is a heavy drinker and appears to drink chronically. His comments indicate that his tolerance to alcohol is considerably higher than Maisie's and the number of whisky bottles in his flat suggest that his alcohol consumption is regular and excessive. The fact that he does not accept that he is drinking excessively means that it is difficult to help him. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has an excellent website at <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/> with a lot of materials for lay people and also for healthcare professionals. It includes resources that James's doctor might find useful when thinking about how to help him.

The effects of untreated chronic alcohol abuse are well known – see the following websites for some good summaries and resources to help your students

<http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/mens-health.htm>

[http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Liver_disease_\(alcoholic\)/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Liver_disease_(alcoholic)/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

<http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/alcohol/alcohol-fact-sheet>

<http://alcalc.oxfordjournals.org/content/44/2/136>

http://www.hamsnetwork.org/brain_damage/

GPs duty of care

The doctor does have a duty to treat James, even though he is resisting it.

<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 keep James on his/her register if he continues to be verbally or physically abuse to the doctor or staff at the practice.