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Reflections

An indescribable suffering

Lena Palaniyappan

Sometimes, practising psychiatry is like working with poetry: seeking a precise metaphor for the world unseen.

She was before me for the second time that month, struggling to describe a newly arrived distress.

It was an intermittent suffering, affecting *all* of her, yet defying every common word in her possession.

'Is it pain?' I asked.

'No'.

'Is this suffering some sort of fatigue?'

'No, it is not that.'

'Anxiety?'; I was not giving up on this line of probing.

'Not exactly'. She was looking increasingly frustrated now. My clinical terms were like worn keys turning in the wrong lock.

She paused, shifted her gaze from the floor to meet mine and said: 'It's a feeling like being a teenager, alone in a waiting room, but not allowed to have their cell phone.'

Recently, she commenced treatment with an antipsychotic. Through more direct, yet dry clinical inquiries, it became evident that she was experiencing akathisia – that incessant internal restlessness.

Her metaphor, graceful in its precision, captured the entire ineffable agony in a single, vivid stroke.

Declaration of interest

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