

Balint Group Leadership

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I am presenting this paper in a year in which I have lost two people who have played a major role in the development of my personal and professional life. One was my father, Carl Levenstein, who was also the founder and senior partner of the practice in which I have worked since entering general practice over 20 years ago. His continuous encouragement and shining personal and professional example was, and will continue to be, a constant source of inspiration to me. The other was Enid Balint: my very dear friend and mentor from whom I was privileged to learn so much; we have lost a priceless gem of a human being whose personal and intellectual qualities could only be marvelled at. It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I dedicate this paper to these two special people in my life.

On a happier note, I am very thankful to be attending an International Balint Conference in the United States. My mind goes back to the first Balint Conference I attended in London in 1978. On that occasion, Ray Greco gave a paper in which he said that "the sleeping giant of the Balint movement in the U.S. has begun to rise". Now, 16 years later we can see that it has well and truly arisen, albeit (if I may permitted a bit of parental self-indulgence) with the help of a couple of very able ex-South Africans!

I have been asked to speak on the topic of the qualities of a Balint group leader, how these may be acquired, and the "credentialing" of Balint group leaders.

The background to the question of Balint group leadership is a long and vexed one, dating back to the very origins of the Balint movement. The paucity of psychoanalyst group leaders and the fact that those that were available were not all suitable gave rise to the debate on the desirability of non-analyst group leaders. Psychologists and psychiatrists were amongst those who were recruited to lead Balint groups, but it was Enid Balint who most emphatically pointed out that these mental health professionals were often more interested in a mutual learning process with general practitioners. She suggested that general practitioners who had been in Balint groups themselves and who possessed the right kind of qualities might be better suited to the role of Balint group leaders. Her view prevailed in many countries of the world, partly necessitated by force of circumstances. While opinions may differ on the desirability of this state of affairs, there can be no doubt that there is a need to evolve criteria for the leadership of Balint groups by general practitioners. That there has been a certain diffidence in this respect until now probably reflects, amongst other things, a lingering self-consciousness about assuming the role of Balint group leadership amongst general practitioners as much as a lack of clarity of thought on this subject. Be that as it may, the time is certainly overdue for open and vigorous discussion and exploration of this topic and this paper is an attempt at a small contribution to this dialogue.

I begin with the first question "the qualities of a Balint group leader". We could of course list many, but I have attempted to reduce them to three broad attributes, which I would regard as the pillars on which the others would rest. They are:

1. Insight
2. Courage
3. Respect

I will attempt to motivate the choice of each attribute briefly;

1. Insight

The Balint group leader needs to have some kind of understanding of patients' and doctors' motivations beyond that which is merely obvious. He needs to understand something of what is taking place in the group process, not least his own reactions and needs as well. He/she should be a thoughtful, reflective person who thinks in depth and not merely in breadth and who can think symbolically rather than concretely. As a bare minimum he/she should have the insight to know that any pre-conceived solutions to the problems which arise in the doctor-patient relationships, whether based on theoretical constructs or personal experience, are not merely useless but also can be counter-productive and even destructive.

2. Courage

Without courage, all the insight in the world will leave us with a Balint group leader who is nothing more than merely clever. A Balint group leader needs to have the courage at certain times to hold a view which rest of the group is at odds with, even though this may incur their resistance and even hostility. At other times, even more courage may be needed to acknowledge that the group's view of a problem may have as much, if not more, validity than his own, and to resist the temptation to "pull rank" or try to refute the group's view with theoretical argumentation. The group leader needs the courage to muster the intellectual and personal honesty to discern which of these responses is more appropriate at a given time. He needs the courage to be flexible while yet being disciplined in his approach. He needs the courage to permit fresh and (possibly for him) risky lines of thought to be explored, including his own hunches and intuitions. In short, as Enid Balint so aptly put it, "the courage of (his) own stupidity". No group can be truly creative without this courage.

3. Respect

Each Balint group and indeed each Balint group member is different and has his/her own unique perspective on his patients, his work and himself. Effective Balint group leaders must manifest respect for each group member's way of trying to make sense of trying to work together. Without this respect, group members will not feel accepted or valued and the risk of negative group phenomena such as power struggles, destructive alliances, etc., will be heightened. The respectful group leader is unlikely to be dogmatic or authoritarian. Hopefully his own self-respect would be a safeguard against this. He would recognize that ultimately our work is, or should be, based on respect for our patients and the ways in which they attempt to wage their struggle with their lives and their health. He would appreciate that his aim as a Balint group leader would be to attempt to facilitate the groups' increased respect for their patients.

These then, would be my somewhat arbitrary criteria for a suitable Balint group leader. In selecting them, I know that I have set myself a very daunting task in addressing the question of how these characteristics may be acquired. For I am well aware that it can easily be argued that insight, courage, and respect are not easily acquired traits and that some would regard them as products of a lifetime's experience or even inheritance, rather than the result of any training technique. How can we foster insight, courage and respect in prospective Balint group leaders? Certainly not by the application of any particular technique! No, first we need to be able to identify people with these characteristics or the potential to develop them. Then we need to realize that these traits can only develop if they are properly nurtured. The prospective Balint group leader needs a culture-medium, an entire ethos in which these potentials can have the opportunity to flourish. For this to happen, the entire training environment of general practitioners or family physicians has to be conducive. It means that the responsibility of those concerned with producing Balint group leaders has to extend to exert an influence on the nature of post-graduate vocational training and residency programmes over and above the purely "Balint" aspects as far as possible. A full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that there are no rough and ready formulae for training Balint group leaders with insight, courage and respect.

Having said this, it must be acknowledged that a great responsibility for acquiring the necessary leadership skills does and will continue to rest on the shoulders of prospective Balint group leaders themselves. For one thing, no beginner-Balint-group leader should consider working with a new group without a co-leader with whom he should engage in open and honest mutual supervision after each meeting. The trainee Balint group leader should also be willing to submit to any processes which could increase his insightfulness and reduce his defensiveness, including, and indeed preferably, personal analysis or therapy.

Finally, I turn to the question of "credentialing" of Balint group leaders. In keeping with the tenor of this paper, I believe it is time that the International Balint Federation mustered the

courage to address this issue squarely. True, insight, courage and respect (to name just the qualities I have singled out for this paper) are difficult, if not impossible, qualities to assess and any attempt to do so must necessarily be subjective to a lesser or greater extent. But this does not reduce the need for a system to be put in place whereby some kind of process of peer review or quality control can be effected. On the contrary, it accentuates the need for it. Of course we know that this is already being practiced to some extent in many places. Verbatim transcripts are made of Balint group meetings and these are either circulated to other Balint group leaders by post for comment and/or discussed at "Balint leadership workshops." I myself had the privilege to have many such transcripts personally supervised by Enid Balint in the process of my own training as a Balint group leader. I believe that this practice of peer review of transcripts has been valuable and commendable, but I do not think it has gone far enough. I feel that this process has to be not only expanded but also be much more formalized. I believe that the International Balint Federation has a decisive role to play in this regard. I believe that it needs to establish a specific committee for the credentialing of Balint group leaders. It needs to appoint appropriate people to this committee to oversee the credentialing of Balint group leaders in each member country. Each country must take responsibility for the credentialing of its leaders but it must be accountable to the International Federation's subcommittee. The International Federation will need to establish uniform criteria for credentialing, e.g., the supervision of a certain number of transcripts of an acceptable standard by supervisors approved by the International Federation. Fees for supervision would have to be paid for trainees to supervisors in accordance with internationally approved practice in relation to training of this nature.

All this may seem to be an unrealistically large undertaking for the International Balint Federation to embark upon, given its numerous other tests and limited resources. Additionally, there may be the fear of treading on toes in an area which nobody fees too sure about. Nevertheless, I believe this project should be regarded not merely as a possibility for the International Balint Federation, but as a priority! For if we do not have the courage to take it on, the leadership issue will continue to fester unchecked without any means of monitoring the standard of the work being done. It will help to foster the development of an "anything goes" attitude to Balint group leadership world-wide. The downhill slide will continue unless we have the courage to try to stop it.

To those who fear giving offence to their colleagues or who ask who is to be given the right to supervise others and according to what guidelines, I would once again respond that "respect" will need to be our watchword. If the supervisor respects the trainee-Balint-group-leader's way of working, it is likely that the trainee will respect his supervisor's comments. This respect is likely to be increased if the supervisor has had the courage to impart his insights honestly and clearly. Ultimately, respect for the International Federation's credentialing process could reach a level where its approval would be sought as a matter of course.

I believe that the future of Balint work will depend largely on the extent to which a proper credentialing-system can be put in place. It is a matter that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency at the highest possible level of our movement in spite of the many difficulties which will be encountered in its implementation. It is a question of whether we have the collective commitment to the cause of Balint work and the mutual goodwill to undertake the task. I believe that we cannot afford to evade the issue any longer.