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SPECIAL ARTICLE

The Sherlock Holmes method in clinical practice^{☆,☆☆}



B. Sopena^{a,b}

^a Unidad de Trombosis y Vasculitis, Complejo Hospitalario Universitario de Vigo (CHUVI), Vigo, Pontevedra, Spain

^b Facultad de Medicina, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, La Coruña, Spain

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Abstract This article lists the integral elements of the Sherlock Holmes method, which is based on the intelligent collection of information through detailed observation, careful listening and thorough examination. The information thus obtained is analyzed to develop the main and alternative hypotheses, which are shaped during the deductive process until the key leading to the solution is revealed. The Holmes investigative method applied to clinical practice highlights the advisability of having physicians reason through and seek out the causes of the disease with the data obtained from acute observation, a detailed review of the medical history and careful physical examination.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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El método de Sherlock Holmes en la práctica clínica

Resumen En este artículo se exponen los elementos integrantes del método de Sherlock Holmes, que está fundamentado en una recogida inteligente de información mediante la observación minuciosa, una escucha atenta y un examen detallado. Los datos, así obtenidos, son analizados para elaborar la hipótesis principal y las alternativas, que se van perfilando durante el proceso deductivo hasta dar con la clave que llevará a la solución del problema. El método de trabajo de Holmes, aplicado a la práctica clínica, destaca la conveniencia de que los médicos razonen y busquen las causas de la enfermedad con los datos obtenidos a partir de la observación aguda, de una historia clínica detallada y de una exploración física cuidadosa.

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E-mail address: bernardosopena@yahoo.es

Introduction

In 1887, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Edinburgh, 1859–1930), while practicing general medicine in Portsmouth, published the novel “A Study in Scarlet”, with which he began his career with Sherlock Holmes. This work reveals the foundations of the science of deduction, an intellectual tool with which he solves the 60 cases that make up the complete works of the detective. In each episode, Holmes attempts to show his methods to Dr. Watson and to those who take an intelligent interest in them (The Reigate Squires, p. 278).

The Holmes method

This method is based on the preparation of a hypothesis based on information collected through detailed observation, careful listening and thorough examination. The most characteristic element of the Holmes method is the ability to detect and give relevance to small details that are usually “*the basis of the deduction*” (The Crooked Man, p. 930). In fact, Holmes defines it thusly: “*You know my method. It is founded upon the observation of trifles*” (The Boscombe Valley Mystery, p. 841).

The Holmes method highlights the importance of deductive reasoning, which analyzes the data received with the goal of separating the essential from the accessory: “*The principal difficulty in your case – remarked Holmes – lay in the fact of there being too much evidence. What was vital was overlaid and hidden by what was irrelevant. Of all the facts which were presented to us, we had to pick just those which we deemed to be essential, and then piece them together in their order, so as to reconstruct this very remarkable chain of events*” (The Naval Treaty, p. 890).

This screening of information has the purpose of identifying, as soon as possible, the key clue that allows us to solve the puzzle, with the greatest efficiency of time and resources: “*It is remarkable only for the fact that amid a perfect jungle of possibilities we, with our worthy collaborator, the inspector, have kept our close hold on the essentials and so been guided along the crooked and winding path*” (The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge, p. 969).

Let us now analyze its main components.

Detailed observation

From the moment Holmes receives a request for assistance, either in writing establishing the problem or on arrival of the person who seeks his services, he sharpens his intense powers of observation: “*Mr. James M. Dodd seemed somewhat at a loss how to begin the interview. I did not attempt to help him, for his silence gave me more time for observation*” (The Adventure of the blanched soldier, pp. 1461–1462). What is characteristic of Holmes’ method of observing is his effort to extract all information contained in what he analyzes without omitting any detail.

‘I can see nothing,’ said I, handing it [the hat] back to my friend.

‘On the contrary,’ Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see.

‘Then, pray tell me what it is that you can infer from this hat?’

He picked it up and gazed at it in the peculiar introspective fashion which was characteristic of him.

...That the man was highly intellectual is of course obvious upon the face of it, and also that he was fairly well-to-do within the last three years, although he has now fallen upon evil days. He had foresight, but has less now than formerly, pointing to a moral retrogression, which, when taken with the decline of his fortunes, seems to indicate some evil influence, probably drink, at work upon him. This may account also for the obvious fact that his wife has ceased to love him. He is a man who leads a sedentary life, goes out little, is out of training entirely, is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which he has had cut within the last few days, and which he anoints with lime-cream” (The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle, p. 391).

For Holmes, observation and deduction are inseparable. Therefore, while observation looks for the most useful aspects to verify the hypothesis, knowing what you want to find illuminates the reality and highlights the details:

“You appeared to read a good deal upon her which was quite invisible to me.

Not invisible but unnoticed, Watson. You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that was important” (A Case of Identity, p. 347).

This ability to detect trifles and letting nothing escape, however irrelevant it seems, requires an active mind and a high level of concentration. It is not an innate quality but rather an ability acquired with training and perseverance: “*I have trained myself to see what others overlook*” (A Case of Identity, p. 341).

Careful listening

One of the more instructive aspects of Holmes is his ability to listen with interest, without ever giving the feeling of haste, questioning when he considers it appropriate to understand the magnitude of the problem and clarify the temporal sequence of events: “*Holmes listened attentively to everything, throwing in a question from time to time*” (The Adventure of the Cardboard Box, p. 901). His method emphasizes how a detailed exposition of the facts, by the victim or witness, is crucial for the resolution of the puzzle: “*I want you to tell my friend your very interesting experience exactly as you have told it to me, or with more detail if possible. It will be of use to me to hear the succession of events again*” (The Stockbroker’s Clerk, p. 849).

Knowing that someone has listened to you carefully creates a climate of trust that enables the speaker to provide relevant information: “*Sherlock Holmes was a past-master in the art of putting a humble witness at his ease, and very soon, in the privacy of Godfrey Staunton’s abandoned room, he had extracted all that the porter had to tell*” (The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter, p. 1195).

Although current movies and television series present a histrionic and almost marginal Holmes, nothing could be further from the truth. His treatment is exquisite, and in each novel he gives us practical lessons in how to generate

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