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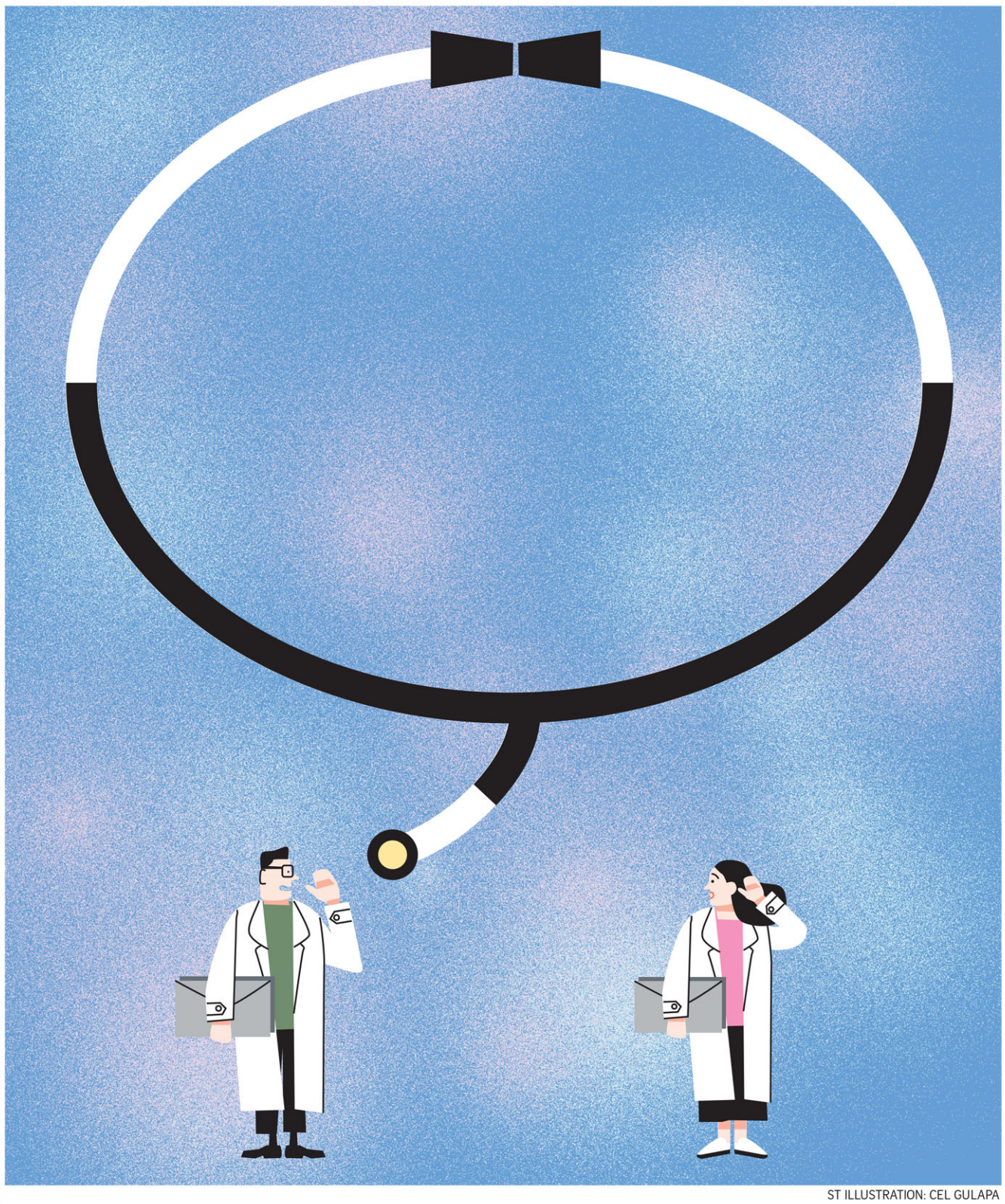
Psst, have you heard...? What the thrill of gossip teaches us

Some gossip can be good, but things get tricky when doctors chatter about patients.

Chong Siow Ann



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

Gossiping has long had a bad rap. Way back in 16th- and 17th-century Britain, those found gossiping were sometimes punished with a "scold's bridle" – an iron contraption that encased the head, with a gag to compress the tongue – making speech impossible.

But it is impossible to suppress what is probably a very human impulse and appetite.

We spend a great deal of our waking hours talking to each other, and much of this time is spent on talking about other people and their doings which are none of our business – gossiping in other words. And let's face it, most of us relish it.

"For what do we live, but to make sport of our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?" asked Jane Austen's Mr Bennet in Pride And Prejudice. This sort of banter is surely gossip, but we wouldn't readily admit to it even as we indulge in it. And certainly, we wouldn't see ourselves as a gossip in the way the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines it: "a person who habitually indulges in the idle talk, especially the spreading of rumours and discussion of the private concerns of others."

Aided and abetted by present-day technology, gossip has gained a reach and a speed unimaginable in Austen's 19th-century world. Consider the recent maelstrom of rumours and wild conspiracy theories over Catherine, Princess of Wales, following her abdominal surgery. The absence from public view of the princess spawned all manner of speculation, not just about her health but also the state of her marriage, that did not abate until she announced in a video released by BBC Studios on March 22 that she has cancer. In the words of a commentator, "the (Kate) Middleton story is a collision of two popular cultures: conspiracy theorising and classic celebrity gossip".

Setting aside issues of invasion of privacy and patient confidentiality, is gossip per se truly a bad thing?

IT'S GOOD FOR THE HEART

In recent years, gossip has entered the realm of serious academic studies, and research in the main has shown the positive effects of gossip – perhaps because of how scholars in this field have defined it – which is simply (and drained of any negative connotation) the "informal personal communication about other people who are absent or treated as absent".

The evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar posited that early gossipy talk helped our ancestors survive by giving them the means to maintain very large social networks through the sharing of valuable information. Gossip, as the theory goes, is a social activity that allows humans to display selective interest in other individuals which strengthens social bonds and conveys information without which neither groups nor society could function.

Other researchers found it is also a way to learn about cultural norms and promote cooperation, and it even enables individuals to protect themselves – for instance, a timely morsel of gossip about a predatory associate could prevent someone from being exploited. (This is borne out by a study done by researchers from Stanford University published in 2014 in the journal Psychological Science. They found that a group of people would ostracise those who they had learnt through gossip to be selfish and untrustworthy, and other groups would also exclude them.)

And the act of gossiping might also have salutary physiological benefits. In a couple of related psychological studies where participants played trust-based investment games, the researchers observed that when someone cheated in a game, the rest were all riled up and their heart rate shot up. And when they were allowed to gossip, by passing a note identifying the culprit, they calmed down and their heart rate slowed as well.

Professor of psychology Megan Robbins, from the University of California, Riverside, argues that gossip can be deployed by society as both a form of policing and punishment.

"If I'm gossiping about someone who cheats a lot, then that in itself is sort of a consequence of cheating, of something that in our culture we consider wrong," she says. "So not only does gossip teach you what people consider good or bad behaviour, but it can also serve itself as a consequence of bad behaviour."

The mere threat of being gossiped about was enough to get people to toe the line and be good. Like a morality tale with its flawed characters, fraught situations and the inevitable comeuppance, a piece of gossip may afford an edifying lesson in how not to conduct oneself.

FIRST WITH THE NEWS

When it comes to effectiveness, negative stories tend to stick better in the mind than positive stories, and what's more, gossiping over something negative about someone makes for better bonding with the audience than sharing a positive opinion or a piece of good news – which says something unflattering about our nature. There is an element of schadenfreude, if not vicarious sadism embedded in negative gossip. People tend to enjoy someone else's misery and misfortunes, and are delighted that it's not happening to them, or that there are others who are doing worse.

Gossiping takes place on many scales, from the boringly commonplace to the mischievous, to the malicious and toxic with its intent to hurt and humiliate, or to exact revenge. It can morph into an instance of mob mentality. People who do not like a person will typically seek out other like-minded people for a huddling-together for the latest gossip. Subsequent conversations would focus on negative and unattractive aspects of that person, and within that echoing chamber, the loathing for the target of the gossip is validated and amplified.

Part of the allure of gossip is that frisson of pleasure of being the person first with the news which comes with that sense of power of possessing some secret information. But it must be told to others to complete the triumph: it makes one the interesting person with "the scoop" which is gratifying to the ego – fleeting though it might be, but it is no less compelling.

Transgressive gossip about patients is destructive because it trivialises them by turning the intimate aspects of their lives, emotions and psyche into banality; it is exploitative as it panders to the prurient entertainment of the public; and it debases the medical profession. But it's not that we don't talk about our patients in the course of our work. We do talk about them in supervisions, in consultations and in case conferences – but always in a way that the patient cannot be identified.

GOSSIPING ABOUT A PATIENT

In the face of the public's insatiable nosiness about Kate Middleton's medical situation, it subsequently emerged that a few staff at the London hospital that treated her are being investigated for accessing her medical records (venality might have played a role as news reporters have been known to pay for such information).

What is disturbing is the disregard of her right to maintain privacy of her medical information and the betrayal of that patient confidentiality which is a cornerstone of medical practice. The duty to keep a patient's information private is written into the codes of ethics of medical organisations and is even emphasised in the Hippocratic oath: "What I may see or hear in the course of treatment," it says, "I will keep to myself."

Disclosure of confidential information without the patient's consent is permissible only when mandated by the law, or to protect the patient or others from physical harm.

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And if truth be told, I do talk to a trusted colleague about some of my upsetting encounters with some challenging patients. An empathetic response from a wiser person who understands the strain and pressure of the work would help me process my feelings, make me more self-aware, and keep me on an even keel and be more understanding of my patients. The identity of the patient is never mentioned because it is irrelevant in such discussions; central is the experience and the personal feelings evoked.

If this is gossip, then I would see this as what the British journalist and biographer Kathryn Hughes has described as "good gossip", which is "a form of intimate knowledge and knowing, a way of understanding the self and the world".

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