



# To err is human

**Dr David Oldham**  
 Medical Director  
 Doctors Health Advisory Service WA

In the last few days of March this year, one particular sports story began dominating the headlines. I remember watching the television and it was "Breaking News". There sitting alone was a very dejected looking Steve Smith, captain of the Australian cricket team, tearfully confessing to a terrible error of judgement from which he will likely never fully recover. His mournful expression, and obvious shame and self-loathing, reminded me of doctors who I have counselled over the years who have also made errors of judgement.

What has amazed but unfortunately not surprised me have been the thousands of trolls on mainstream and social media crucifying Smith in a manner and language that would make an outsider think he was a cold-hearted mass murderer.

Yes, he has done the wrong thing. Yes, he deserves punishment. However, the rabid outpouring of condemnation would also make one think that no one else in the world has ever made a mistake.

Earlier this month, we saw a "shattered" Andrew Gaff from the West Coast Eagles publicly apologise to Fremantle Docker Andrew Brayshaw for punching him during the Western Derby match on 5 August.

Whenever I talk to a doctor who has made a misjudgement resulting in error, their harshest critic has always been themselves. A multitude of "if onlys" play out in their mind –

"if only I had checked the patient earlier"; "if only I had listened to the nurse"; if only I had ordered XYZ test" etc.

Like Smith, they would give anything to be able to turn back the clock and change the few seconds that have so affected their life. Unfortunately, their many years of good work and selfless dedication to their profession seemingly count for nothing.

So why are doctors so unforgiving of themselves and other doctors?

There are three main reasons.

One is our training. At medical school, I was told by many teachers that if one studied hard enough, then errors could be eliminated. I have since found out that perfection is, of course, impossible.

As a wise supervisor once told me, there are two kinds of doctors – those who have made errors and those who will. Medicine is not an exact science.

A second reason is the impossibly high expectations placed on doctors by society and our patients. With Dr Google and increasing technology, there are a multitude of lawyers and media telling patients that anything less than a perfect outcome is unacceptable.

Finally, our own personality type works against us. The selection processes for medical school favours those who

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## THE SECOND VICTIM PHENOMENON

The feelings described in the article are so common that a body of literature exists called "the second victim phenomenon" (about the health professional). Following are some further resources for those interested in this topic.

- Ted Talk by Dr Brian Goldman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUbfRzxNy20>
- *Second victims, organizational resilience and the role of hospital administration*  
 Chiara M Santomauro<sup>1</sup>, Cor J Kalkman<sup>2</sup>, Sidney WA Dekker<sup>3</sup>, Journal of Hospital Administration, 2014, Vol. 3, No. 5  
[https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/110549/The-second-victim-Professor-Sidney-Dekker.pdf](https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/110549/The-second-victim-Professor-Sidney-Dekker.pdf)
- *The second victim phenomenon: A harsh reality of health care professions*  
 S.D. Scott Patient Safety Network, May 2011, <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/perspectives/perspective/102/the-second-victim-phenomenon-a-harsh-reality-of-health-care-professions>