

SIGN OF THE TIMES: PART II

Lessons Learned From My Patient

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I am third-year resident in internal medicine ready to graduate in a month. As part of my program's graduation traditions, new graduates are asked to present their Most Memorable Patient—a tribute to the patients who teach us every day. As I considered the list of patients who I will likely never forget, Mr. RH was at the top.

All through our medical training, we are taught that we are teachers and guides for our patients. I, however, feel quite the contrary. I have learned to be good doctor from my patients.

Let me begin with a quick description of Mr. RH. Mr. RH is a 57-year-old white male with multiple medical problems: diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, coronary heart disease, peripheral neuropathy, anemia, osteoarthritis, and hypothyroidism. He used to work as a nuclear medicine technician until he lost his job three years ago. He currently works part-time as a clerk. I have been his primary care physician for the last two years.

Here are the lessons that I learned from Mr. RH.

Trust and Sense of Responsibility

When patients see their physicians, they place the highest level of trust one human being can place on another. Whenever I came up with a care plan for Mr. RH, he would smile and say, "You are my doctor. I trust you. I have faith in your treatment." As a first-year resident in training, I was moved by his trust; it motivated me to do my very best. Even now, Mr. RH inspires me, particularly on hard days.

Money Matters: Financial Hardship of Patients

During his visit in June of last year, Mr. RH came to my clinic with uncontrolled blood sugars and hypertension. He reported that he had been out of his medications for about two weeks. He had lost his job, and he was depressed. He did not have money for the copay for his medications and diabetes supplies and had to decide whether to pay for housing and food or medications. Luckily for him, he was able to find another job within a couple of weeks and borrow money from a friend so that he could restart his medications.

This made me realize that many patients who are noncompliant with their medications fully understand their importance. They want to comply but are limited by finances, the availability of transportation, language and cultural barriers, mental illness, and social issues. I learned that behind ICD-9-CM diagnosis code V15.81 (i.e. personal history of noncompliance with medical treatment, presenting hazards to health) lies a myriad of reasons related to humanity.

Patience, Strength, and Motivation

One busy summer afternoon, I was running behind schedule in clinic. I was on a busy in-patient service, post call and exhausted. My last patient that day was Mr. RH, who was 20 minutes late. Our clinic policy allows us to reschedule patients who are late. As I began asking my medical assistant to reschedule Mr. RH, I saw on the video monitor that

he was walking with a cane. I changed my mind and took his appointment. During the visit, he told me that he had recently sprained his ankle. He was very apologetic for being late: He had to change two buses and walk several blocks in blistering Arizona heat to keep his appointment. I was humbled and yet again motivated not only to see Mr. RH but also to finish all my pending notes and tasks before heading home. My troubles seemed so trivial. I learned the lesson of patience.

Forgiveness

Mr. RH had his finger bitten by his neighbor's dog. He developed cellulitis following the bite and was hospitalized for intravenous antibiotics and debridement. His hospital course was complicated by a clot in his arm, which we treated with warfarin for six months. Several months following his discharge during a routine clinic visit, Mr. RH brought up the subject of his neighbor's dog. I was surprised Mr. RH had no angry feelings about his neighbor and had in fact looked after the dog while his neighbor was in the hospital.

There is a lesson with every patient I see. Some of these lessons have motivated me and helped me grow as a physician. My patients have humbled me by their resilience and resolve to fight critical and chronic illness. As I complete my final days of residency, I feel morally obliged to be an advocate for my patients who have taught me indispensable lessons about life.