

Lessons From Our Learners

William D. Grant, EdD
Feature Editor

Editor's Note: Submissions to this column may be in the form of papers, essays, poetry, or other similar forms. Editorial assistance will be provided to develop early concepts or drafts. If you have a potential submission or idea, or if you would like reactions to a document in progress, contact the series editor directly: William D. Grant, EdD, SUNY Upstate Medical University, Department of Family Medicine, 475 Irving Avenue, Suite 200, Syracuse, NY 13210. 315-464-6997. Fax: 315-464-6982. grantw@upstate.edu.

My Patient, the Cubs Fan

Peter Weir, MD, MPH

Eager, fresh, and new. Halfway through my third year of medical school, it's the first day of my Hem/Onc rotation. After quick introductions, I prepare to meet my first patient—Mrs H. The senior resident shuffles through the cards and gives me the one-liner—oh yeah, Mrs H, she's dying of pancreatic cancer.

Every day I round on her. Early in the morning the hallway lights are off so it's dark. I still remember which room. I pause each morning at the door trying to look like I'm concentrating on the vitals. I give the door a few quick knocks and crack it open.

Mrs H lies on her bed sleeping with her mouth wide open. She is yellow and worn out. The bed seems to be swallowing her. Her husband is there every morning with questions—What's "the team" going to do today? When is she

going to feel better? When can we leave? Mrs H casually listens.

The attending—knowledgeable, brash, and intimidating. I remember walk-rounds outside the room but I can't remember him ever in Mrs H's room. He must have been in there to let her know she was going to die. The intern—busy, too busy. Didn't he tell the family?

Two long weeks pass. Mrs H is cranky and tired. Some days she doesn't want to talk. I finally make her smile, a little. She's a big baseball fan—the Cubs of course. We share our opinions about players. Our conversations are short, but I notice a big difference—she enjoys my company. Each morning she looks amused as I ask her the increasingly redundant medical questions. She perks up as we talk about last night's ball game.

Her health deteriorates. When she can't swallow, an EGD is scheduled. Mr H is sure she will do much better once "they" figure out how to make her swallow again. Why is he so sure? I think that's what we told him. I transport my patient to the GI lab and watch. She gags, she

gasps. Through the versed haze, she suddenly locks onto my eyes and silently pleads, "No more." I look away in shame. Back in her room, her breathing becomes labored and Mr H looks nervous.

Mrs H's nurse—gentle, kind, and practical. She has seen this all before. Without warning, she pages Dr Death (the medical school's expert on death and dying). Dr Death enters the room with confidence, almost with a swagger. He looks at Mrs H and then at me and shakes his head with disappointment. At that moment he finally frees us—1 day, maybe 1 week—but definitely no longer. Everybody cries except Dr Death. Emotions consume me: embarrassment, anger, and sadness but ultimately relief. Relief that she knows, that Mr H knows. I wipe away my tears and finally talk to the family openly. As I ease the door closed and walk down the hallway, I realize for the first time, she is my patient.

The next morning as I enter the "team" room, the intern looks at me and bluntly reports—Your patient died last night—probably

(Fam Med 2007;39(3):167-8.)

From the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, University of Utah.

aspirated—sorry. I can't speak. I've never lost my voice before, it's just like the movies. The big lump in my throat won't go away. There is no sign of my patient or her family. The room is empty as if nothing happened. At noon, I'm "excused." As I drive home on the freeway, I

see the cars lining up at the ballpark. Almost unconsciously I pull off and buy a ticket. Numb, I find my seat. I look up from the shaded seats—the sun is finally out and the grass is impossibly green—a perfect spring day to watch a baseball game. As the players warm up, I

can sense Mrs H sitting next to me. For the first time in weeks I realize I'm smiling.

Correspondence: Address correspondence to Dr Weir, Madsen Health Center, 555 Foothill Blvd., Salt Lake City, UT 84112. 801-581-8000. Fax: 801-585-5393. pweir@comcast.net.