

Lessons From Our Learners

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A Gentle Stare

Kurt Scherer, MD

Inattentively resting on the form-molding couch while watching an Orlando Magic basketball game at my sister Ingrid's home, I faintly hear my wife, Allison, say "I missed my period this month. And you know, I've been feeling kinda tired too." Attributing this to her intense cycling and running regimen, I brush aside any ideas of pregnancy (although we had been trying for the last 8 months) and state, "Don't worry about it. You run a lot, and this is probably just another missed period." However, my statement does not carry much weight because my mother, proudly visiting her other four grandchildren, happens to be in the same room at my sister's home. She quickly and excitedly darts to the nearest Walgreens and returns with

four or five different pregnancy tests, each guaranteeing better than 99% accuracy.

She excitedly places the pregnancy tests in Allison's hands, and Allison immediately knows of her upcoming mission: give Mama Scherer grandchild number five. Allison carefully attempts the first pregnancy test, and then we timidly read the results. Negative. My determined mother cannot accept defeat, so she asks for a recount. Similar results occur again, and again, and again. Disappointed and fearful of the possibilities of infertility, we quietly leave my sister's home and drive to our silent home.

Later the same evening, my sister Ingrid, who gave birth 5 months prior, decides to take a pregnancy test for fun. The results are blatantly negative; however, she expertly notices that her test reading appears different from the multiple tests Allison had taken earlier. Realizing that we read the test results incorrectly, she sprints from the

bathroom to the living room and shouts, "It's positive!" Ingrid's husband, Mike, exhaustively resting on the couch after a challenging day at the hospital, hears these words and shockingly states, "Oh no!" She quickly clarifies the confusion by explaining "Kurt and Allison read the test wrong. It was positive."

With the excitement of our upcoming delivery a mere 9 months away, Allison and I suddenly realize that I already committed to the medical mission trip "Project Haiti." We immediately contemplate sobering questions like "What if something happens to me while in Haiti? What if something happens to Allison while I am in Haiti?" and wonder whether I should satisfy my commitment.

It's the final day of a 6-day, 8-hour work schedule on a hot Thursday afternoon in a Haitian grade school turned clinic. A fellow medical student and I continue to see patients and to struggle with our Spanish. A smiling, humble fam-

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ily consisting of the grandmother, mother, daughter, and twin sons calmly find themselves a place to sit—two broken chairs, a dusty medical table, and a cracked sink countertop.

We examine the identical twins, and we are excited that we are skilled enough to “diagnose” a grade-three systolic murmur in both boys. During all of this scientific excitement, from the corner of my eyes I see the young daughter sitting quietly and instinctively feel that she is the one needing our help. After obtaining the girl’s history from the grandmother and performing a physical exam, we determine the diagnosis: scabies. We obtain

a worn, nearly empty container of Permethrin cream from the make-shift pharmacy and return to the clinic room. My thoughts prepare for the upcoming battle that will ensue, for the Permethrin cream lathering of every child we had seen with this condition earlier in the week resulted in epic screaming matches.

As we cover her in the Permethrin cream, this girl was completely different. She quietly stands still with a gentle stare. With her dark brown eyes, she looks deep into my eyes, and I see my future daughter in her. The moment becomes a heavenly experience for me as my heart changes from the methodical

approach of history-physical exam-diagnosis-treatment to helping *my* little baby girl. I make sure to cover every inch of her frail body with the cream, counsel the mother on cleaning her daughter’s clothes and bed sheets, and then take the child to the pharmacy to receive a stuffed animal. This humble girl taught me to view all patients as my father, mother, son, daughter, or wife. For my next patient, treatment may be the same, but the compassion will be different.

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