

## Lessons From Our Learners

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**William D. Grant, EdD**

Feature Editor

**Jo Marie Reilly, MD**

Associate Editor

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## Boiler Room

**Sabesan Karupiah, MD, DFM; Uche Akwuba, DO**

5 am. My alarm goes off. It's already time for another day of work. An hour later, my fellow intern Uche and I, only in our second month of training, are already at the hospital frantically writing notes and preparing for rounds. There is no other way to write notes as an intern, especially when there is a new patient waiting to be seen.

That morning, I meet Mr X for the first time. He had been admitted with shortness of breath and severe neck swelling. He told me that he had not seen a doctor in more than 30 years and even now didn't want to come to the hospital. He finally felt he had no choice but to come since he was perpetually short of breath. The neck metastases from his brain lymphoma were press-

ing on his trachea. He had already undergone both chemotherapy and radiation therapy and was waiting to be discharged to the Hospice.

During his first few days, Mr X had no visitors, except for Uche and me. His phone didn't ring, and no flowers arrived at his bedside. No cards with little hearts and "Get well soon" were on his wall. He spent the days either in tears or fighting them back. Uche and I started spending more and more time every day talking to him. Gradually, we gained his trust. It seemed that we were the only people that were close to him.

One day, he asked us if we could do him a small favor. He wanted us to retrieve some belongings from his apartment since he was sure he wasn't ever going to get out of the hospital. Uche and I took up the assignment to help our patient because we cared about him and felt sorry for him but also on a whim to prove to ourselves that we could do it. We convinced our attending

to let us make this home visit since there was no other way to collect his belongings.

We excitedly told Mr X the good news. He hesitated at first, gave us his address, and then told us we wouldn't be able to find his residence very easily. The first time he said this, Uche and I disregarded it. We talked to Mr X about the possessions he valued most and asked him what mementos he wanted us to bring. After telling us, he warned us again that it would be difficult to find his home. We wondered how difficult it could be when we had his address. Perplexed, we headed out into the South Bronx to find his home. He lived on Fordham Road.

I remember that early spring day vividly—it was the first warm day we had in weeks when it hadn't rained. Some people were milling about Fordham Road while others were sitting on the stoops gossiping with neighbors or just enjoying the good weather. We found the general area easily enough but could

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From the Department of Family Medicine,  
University of Pittsburgh.

not find exactly where Mr. X used to live. We kept walking back and forth, with the same people staring at us and saying hello to the same people each time. At this point, out of desperation, we pulled out Mr X's New York State driver's license and started asking people if they knew him.

A couple of people recognized his face, but no one could tell us exactly where he lived. Only one couple knew him personally, but even they couldn't tell us where he lived. All they wanted to know was if he was dead or not. I shook my head and trudged along, feeling more and more like an undertaker trying to put together a memorial service with each passing step.

The sun was starting to set, and we were about to give up the search when we decided to explore a tiny alleyway littered with trash. Meandering down some cement steps at the end of the alley, we discovered a door with Mr X's "number" on it. His key opened the door. Uche and I glanced nervously at each other, breathed a sigh of relief, and braced ourselves for what lay on the other side of the wooden door.

We entered the windowless boiler room of an old pre-war apartment building. Stacked high on either side of the door leading to his makeshift room were dirty cardboard boxes filled with soda cans and bottles that Mr X must have collected. The room was oppressively stuffy, made even worse by the piles of garbage bags. The first thing that hit us when we walked in was the strong odor of cat urine. I just couldn't understand how Mr X had spent his last months in a boiler room isolated from the rest of society. I could not have imagined living there in the middle of

spring, much less in the dog days of summer.

On the far wall of his home, we saw black and white pictures of his family and stacks of books about art and literature. Unfortunately, just as our eyes were adjusting to the lighting, the single bulb in the dimly lit room went out. Now in the dark, we groped about using only the lights from our cell phones to look for the valuable he wanted the most. Then, we saw it. His most treasured possession.

It was a picture of him, only slightly younger, receiving his college diploma from Baruch College. He was so proud in his cap and gown receiving that college diploma. It was a defining moment for him and a memory he wanted to remember in the hospital as he contemplated the finality of his terminal illness. We took the picture carefully off the shelf to take back to him.

As we continued going through Mr X's personal belongings, I became increasingly saddened as I thought of how a college graduate could live his last days in a windowless boiler room collecting cans. I felt as though hard times could unexpectedly affect me or my family members or anyone for that matter. It was humbling to think that even for a college graduate eager to face the world, sometimes life has other things in store.

Delivering Mr X's belongings to him was a most gratifying moment. He quickly went through them and paused when he saw his graduation picture. He looked at me, said, "Thank you," and then started crying. These tears were different than the ones I was used to seeing, though. With one hand, he swatted at his tears and with the other he

wiped the dust off his diploma. He rested his hands on this picture for a few minutes as if transporting himself to a better time.

Uche and I were left with a sense of true accomplishment. We had fulfilled a dying man's last wish. We knew that visiting Mr X's home went beyond just doing a good deed. Our "job" descriptions only dictated that we diagnose and treat patients. However, this home visit showed us the importance of understanding the environment in which our patients live and what they endure every day. Only by walking in Mr X's shoes for a few hours were we able to truly empathize with him and realize just how much his home situation affected his health and his willingness to seek help.

Our visit to Mr X's boiler room left lasting footprints on our souls and created real and enduring change at how we look at our role as family docs. Mr X's problems became ours, and even though he passed away shortly after we delivered his mementos, he will always live on as a part of Uche and me. In my 3 short years as a family medicine resident, I have learned many things in many places. On the inpatient unit, I mastered the care of the seriously ill. In our clinics, I learned the value of continuity of care and preventive medicine. But in that dark, airless boiler room, I was taught that every patient is a noble person, and their story is worthy of being told.

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*Corresponding Author:* Address correspondence to Dr Karuppiah, UPMC Lawrenceville Family Health Center, 3937 Butler Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15201. 862-823-8841. sabesan@yahoo.com.