Always a Plague: Camus’ Dr Rieux and the AIDS Pandemic

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Resisting reason, excluding experience, I feel fear in my gut, when I encounter a plague. The word plague precipitates visions of the Black Death, cholera, polio, smallpox, Ebola. Even among physicians trained to think objectively and to use evidence, an encounter with a plague, an epidemic of contagious disease with a high mortality, frightens us—especially early, when the mode of spread is not well understood and when treatment is not available. AIDS was such a plague.

Randy Shilts’ German chocolate cake scared me. During a ski week in Aspen in January 1990, my wife and I had Randy Shilts and his friend as our houseguests. We gladly welcomed Randy, familiar with his book, And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic (1980–85), a brilliant expose of the AIDS epidemic. Randy, who died of AIDS in 1994, had a sharp intellect that barely concealed a wicked sense of humor. He was a trickster. His friend Bill, an expert skier, and Randy, a novice, dressed in down parkas, wool hats, thick mitts, carrying skis and poles, would leave our house early every morning, to, we thought, ski. Late in the afternoon they would return tired but happy. Bill was on the slopes, but Randy never got on the mountain. He found a place to read. The pretense lasted until their last day in town when Randy and Bill took us out to dinner.

We had a lovely dinner until dessert. Randy had ordered a German chocolate cake, richly topped with icing. I said, “That really looks good.” Randy offered me a piece, placing a portion on his fork. I did not know that Randy had tested positive for HIV, which he did not reveal until he was close to death, but I was suspicious: I understood the transmission of the virus among gay men. Though realizing rationally that the chance of acquiring HIV from a bite of the cake was impossible, I still hesitated as we looked at each other over the milk-chocolate frosting. Finally, shame forced me to accept. In that instant, I realized that refusal would lose a friend and any credibility I had as a doctor. Eerily scared, I swallowed the cake, now tasteless. Even now, still seeing that fork, I hate myself for that momentary retreat and wonder did Randy think me ignorant, dumb, or cowardly.

I remembered that episode years later when I added Camus’ novel, The Plague, to the reading list for my undergraduate seminar, “Novels of Illness.” These students did not live through the early days of AIDS: no treatment, sure death. Though some had volunteered to work in HIV clinics in Africa, they were blasé, immune to the dread I feel anticipating the next plague. I assigned Camus wondering how reading The Plague would change their appreciation of epidemic diseases. Though the book can be read, as Camus explained, as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France or as an example of Camus’ existential philosophy, I was interested in what the story had to teach premedical students.

Dr Bernard Rieux is a practicing physician in the city of Oran when the bubonic plague breaks out. A quarantine is instituted but escape is possible, knowing and paying the right people. Rieux has acceptable reasons to leave Oran: His wife is dying, away in a TB sanitarium; he has no effective treatment for the victims—he can diagnose but cannot cure. He is constantly exposed to the infection, no Hazmat suit is available—especially when the plague develops a pneumonic form. He is afraid, yet he stays. He persists though overwhelmed by suffering. He remains though he cannot get used to seeing patients die. His attitude at the start of the plague is “Do your job as it should be done,” though day after day he is exhausted, working until late in the night, sleeping 4 hours.

This credo persists throughout the length of the epidemic, even when he learns his wife in not doing well. He persists though he feels compassion for his patients, for he soon “grows out of pity when it is useless,” adopting an attitude of “bleak indifference,” knowing that the epidemic means “a never ending defeat.” Nor does Rieux stay
to serve God: He does not believe, nor does he accept, as the local priest proclaims, that the plague is God’s punishment. Without having a single cure, he refuses to give in to the plague. He believes in human decency, which for him requires that he continue to do his job. Rieux’s courage, in contrast to my silly reaction over a bite of cake, brought to mind the behavior of doctors in a plague. What should the physician’s response be to a new epidemic—perhaps swine flu or, ever more possible, biologic warfare, another anthrax attack or worse—with the likelihood of transmission from patients? And what should doctors do during natural disasters? Stay in a hospital that is without utilities when their own families and homes are in danger?

Was Rieux foolish? Should he have left? Under what circumstances can doctors refuse to see and treat patients? Does special training matter?

Does family decide? When does fear override reason? Would Rieux be immoral to leave? In contemplating these imponderables, the majority of the students thought Rieux had sufficient reason to leave without guilt, especially since his function as a doctor, a healer—one who can cure—was absent.

Even the most demanding patient would not expect doctors to function under extreme conditions. At 25,000 feet on the summit of a Himalayan peak, a doctor cannot be asked to remove an appendix. Without proper protective gear, a physician should not be required to care for a ward of TB patients with open cavities. No one would consider asking a doctor to treat a patient in the midst of a violent psychotic break.

Who should decide whether medical personal are obliged to treat or not, stay or go? The state, medical societies, patients? No set of rules exist, no laws are written. Too many contingencies. The lesson for students: Doctors must weigh the risks to their patients, to themselves, and their family. Protected against anthrax, antibiotics in hand, working in a well-equipped hospital with a full support staff, most doctors would stay. Under similar circumstances in the wilderness, a physician might choose to leave. No one forces, cajoles, even suggests that Rieux stay. He decides. He will do his job. During the next, the inevitable plague, I believe my students will remember the lessons of Camus, decide for themselves, thinking rationally without fear.

Notes

I spoke to Randy a few weeks before his death. I asked him how his T-cell count was doing. I felt his smile: “Hell, they can’t even find any to count.” No dread, no despair. Only acceptance.

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