

Stay

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As an intern, I thought of myself as the member of the team who gets the things done. I took pride in prioritizing my long list of tasks and efficiently working through each item. I spent most of my time at the computer, on the phone, in front of the chart, or in a consultant's office. My time with patients was so limited that I grew more comfortable thinking about their medical problems away from their bedside.

At the end of my intern year, one of my patients in the cardio-vascular intensive care unit, developed atrial fibrillation with a rapid ventricular rate, during morning pre-rounds. Thankfully, my resident was there to help me think through what to do, since I was nervous about evaluating tachyarrhythmias. We started the treatment and I walked away to review the labs and telemetry. My resident called out, "Where is Jennifer? She should stay and see this." I walked back to the room with some hesitation as I was worried there was something wrong. Indeed, we had to adjust our treatment, and with the change I stayed to watch the response. Throughout the experience, the patient laid quietly looking to us for reassurance, which we gave as we quickly titrated his medication, and controlled his tachycardia. In this moment at the bedside, after I had pulled myself away from the gripping rhythm of completing tasks for rounds, I realized the necessity of seeing the impact of my treatment as it was happening. Beyond this, I experienced the power of staying with my patient to reassure him. I realized that he relied on me and that he needed me to be there with him.

It is shocking when one moment seems to change your life forever. I have been there when a patient receives a new diagnosis and in that moment his life is completely different. Similarly, there have been moments when my patient's experience redefines how I act as a physician.

This past summer I took care of a middle aged gentleman at the peak of his life who had a devastating bladder cancer. In addition to our medical therapy he required multiple urologic procedures to lighten the burden the tumor had on his body. After one of these procedures

he grew delirious and combative. I arrived at the bedside and starting working through my differential diagnosis. His wife was grasping his hand while desperately trying to reorient his wandering mind. I thought to myself, "Ok, let me work through my mnemonic GO TIMES: glucose, oxygen, toxins, infection, metabolic causes, endocrine causes, and stroke or seizure." At the end of my work up I was left with a medication reaction from benzodiazepines and hypoxia. I remained at his bedside throughout the work up and explained what I was thinking and doing to his wife who worked with me to keep reorienting him. When I left late that evening he was calm, still mildly confused, but better. We were all feeling better and calmer.

After a long three weeks of treatment it was finally time for him to leave the hospital. At the end of our last conversation, he asked me if he could give me a hug. His wife smiled, and I said, "Sure." He hugged me and said, "You saved me."

I didn't save him from his cancer. He died just one month later. Since I wasn't able to save his life, it was hard for me to understand why he would say such powerful words to me. I had stayed close by his bedside when he needed help with his pain, delirium or anxiety. As I eased his suffering, he grew to trust me and rely on me. I felt like I was solving small problems by staying with him to make sure his pain, anxiety, and delirium were treated well. These problems seemed insignificant, even trivial, in the shadow of his cancer. In the end they weren't insignificant at all.

It is sometimes easy to forget that my routine work up of common problems can have a profound effect on my patient. Whether I realize it or not, I can change a life by staying by the bedside to see how my patient responds to what I prescribe or to just talk about what is happening in his body that's out of his control. In the process of the struggle with disease my patient changes me into a deeply caring physician with the power to save a life in ways big and small.