

More Than a Diagnosis: What Hospice Taught Me As a Medical Student

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The shadow of the withered pink flowers lingered over the ghostly shape of a worn-out deck of cards on the cold windowsill. Unable to visit in person due to strict COVID-19 restrictions in hospice, her loved ones had her favorite flowers delivered to brighten the room in their absence. Now, as the petals curled inward and stems sagged, the flowers seemed to echo the weight of all that had been left unsaid.

Just four weeks earlier, my anxious first hospice visit was with the “cranky and argumentative patient.” Nervously shaking her petite hands with my gloved, sweaty palms, she immediately stated we were to play “King’s Corner.” Afraid to admit I had never played, after a few rounds, we carried on like old friends, bonding over her bird-watching hobbies and our feisty competitive natures. Visits beginning with “I’ve been waiting all day to play cards with you” ended with her asking if I would return next week. She was indeed snarky to caregivers whenever dinner time interrupted. However, her “cranky and argumentative” demeanor was a misunderstood expression of her loneliness and longing for companionship. After our third visit together, I finally caught on and managed to win my first game. “It’s about time,” she had jokingly teased as we planned a rematch after

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Easter. I did not know it then, but that would be our last visit playing cards together.

“Will you sit with me?” “How long will you stay?” As I held her hand to reassure her of my presence, her body relaxed into a peaceful

a game of cards. Throughout our four short weeks, her snarky comments and life reflections rarely masked her fatal cancer diagnosis. I had no idea how to talk about death, let alone grieve over a loved one. Suddenly, death

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slumber. I then understood the beauty of “passing peacefully.” While the spunky, free-spirited “card sharp” lay disoriented and mumbling incoherently, her hearty smile and twinkling eyes were hidden behind closed eyelids – clear indicators of the physical burden her body had endured since our last visit. The dreaded moment had come. Prior to volunteering in hospice, I thought death was something to be feared and avoided at all costs. But as I sat with her in her final moments, something shifted in me. I understood that death was not something to avoid, but rather, something to meet with compassion, dignity, and presence. It was not the end of the story, but a chapter deserving of care and respect.

In that quiet space, I came to understand the quiet complexities of human connection, especially when faced with the imminent end. I realized that connection is more than just having a conversation, it is built through simple acts such as listening without judgment, showing compassion, or simply being present for

ceased to be an abstract idea. I had to face the imminence of her passing straight-on.

My time with her matters because it broadens my understanding of what medicine encompasses – not just saving lives, but also helping patients with the end of life, offering them a safe and compassionate space to embrace their journey. She showed me the true meaning of resilience and the kind of physician I want to be: one who meets patients where they are, with empathy, compassion, and the readiness to sit with them in their most vulnerable moments. This experience has not only deepened my understanding of medicine but has also helped shape the physician I strive to become – one who embraces the delicate balance between life and death with grace and respect.

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