



Four Vignettes

Exploring the doctor-patient relationship **BY TROY ELANDER, MD**

THESE DAYS the worth of a visit to the doctor seems to be continually devalued. This occurs despite marked improvements in medical care, whether through diagnostics, techniques, medicines, or improved surgical skill. I'm a specialist—an ophthalmologist. We're often told how we have to speed up, become more efficient—see more patients per unit of time. However, we are also physicians who deal with the whole person and offer more than simply what one's refraction is for the clearest vision. Part of being a physician, specialist or not, is the doctor-patient relationship. A recent morning clinic of mine reinforced this concept.

I usually see one patient every 10-15 minutes. One Friday this summer, a typical morning, I decided to take note of my interactions. I decided to record, at random, four consecutive patient visits in my morning schedule. The first patient was a 67 year-old diabetic male whom I've seen for over 20 years. I've done cataract surgery on his wife and, due to his diabetes, seen him at least annually. He always asks me about my family and in particular about my oldest daughter because of her soccer playing. Her club soccer team has given me much father-daughter time with

nearly year-round practices and tournaments. This talk always brings back fond memories for "Mr. Jones" whose son was a club hockey player. He recounts waking in the early morning to get his son to the rink for practice in the dark. He always warns me that the time passes quickly and that I should appreciate every moment my kids are at home. "They'll be gone before you know it," he has said on more than one occasion. (I will know it really soon as my daughter leaves for college in late August.)

As I ask Mr. Jones how his son is doing now, his tone changes as he tells me of his son's divorce. I hear the pain in his voice, and I quietly listen as he tells me of his son's difficult marriage. I sense a need for him to get this out. It's just a moment but I know this catharsis, this release, this sharing, helps. His diabetes is quiet and his eyes are healthy for another year.

My next patient, "Mark Stern", is one-week status post cataract surgery. One of his sons was a classmate of mine in junior high and high school. Another son has been a contractor in my neighborhood. I am part of a local running group several days a week and Mr. Stern was a founding member of that group over 30 years ago. His wife is a patient as well,

so I know this family. He's seeing great without correction.

Next is "Barbara Erickson" who is terribly worried her eyes have suffered a chemical injury from a freak exposure in Las Vegas. It turns out the pool cleaner at a large hotel miscalculated by a power of 10 the chlorine needed for cleaning. There was an audible "pop" poolside with apparent vaporization. Guests around the pool suffered significant burning sensations to their skin and eyes with some even vomiting. It's been months now, but she is terrified of permanent consequences for herself and her children. I listen to her fears and though no signs of harm are present on examination, I carefully review steps we can take to relieve her symptoms. I know it reassures her to hear there are no apparent long-term findings but that I am available for her should anything change.

The last patient of the hour is "Sally Archer," another patient of 20 years. She used to work across the street as a manager, had cataract surgery years ago and is now retired. She looks thin and reports on how she is dealing with chemotherapy for colon cancer. She is brave and optimistic and looking forward to her final round. Despite her significant weight loss and fatigue, she believes in her future. She also has glaucoma for which she uses drops to keep her intraocular pressure in a safe range. I'll see her again in four months to ensure no IOP change and to hear how her fight with cancer continues.

And there you have it—four consecutive patients taken at random. I could tell you interesting stories about the next four as well but I think you get my point. I may have fallen a few minutes behind but those are minutes I will gladly give up on my lunch break because they are the minutes that solidify the doctor-patient relationship. They are minutes that we and our patients need and are what make practicing medicine all that it can be.

As we deal with budget cuts and legislators who have to make tough choices, I hope we can remind them of the importance of the doctor-patient relationship. By having a relationship, which takes time to develop, these visits rise to a much more meaningful level than the particular organ system being examined.

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