



Connection

Margaret Butler

Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

“I just want some stability in my life again, ya know?” he said, the tears rolling down his face unabashedly, a few used-up tissues already in hand.

“I know. I want that for you, too,” I said softly, passing him a clean tissue with my left hand while resting my right gently on his shoulder.

This middle-aged, weather-worn man had walked into our student-run free clinic that morning with a briefcase in hand and a tired look in his eyes. Like many of the patients that we serve at the Magis Clinic, he was homeless. Also like many of our patients, he had quite a few unfortunate life circumstances that caused him to end up without a place to call his own: a move, a divorce, the loss of a job, the loss of his health. He opened up about all of these events to me in the forty minutes that we had been talking together in the small, cramped room that functioned as our Patient Liaison office.

As a Patient Liaison at the Magis Clinic, I do some of the tasks that a social worker might do. I do my best to help patients get connected to additional resources in the community, especially resources that would help them establish long-term continuity of care. During my initial intake interviews, I hear a lot of each patient’s story: how they came to be homeless or uninsured, what their support system is like, which medical or psychiatric conditions they’ve been diagnosed with, and even details about traumatic experiences the person has lived through.

These interviews and encounters with patients can be raw and emotional. Despite having many good reasons not to trust other people (from years of being on the streets or from a traumatic childhood, perhaps), many patients are surprisingly eager to share their stories. It’s hard to say why patients are so willing to open up, but I think it has to do with the special atmosphere of student-run free clinics like the Magis Clinic. I believe patients simply want to be heard and to make a caring connection with someone, and volunteers at the Magis Clinic are there to listen and to make a caring connection with someone. Sometimes, it’s as beautifully simple as that.

As an undergraduate, I went on a service-learning trip to Baltimore and volunteered at a soup kitchen called Our Daily Bread. While serving a meal there one day, I struck up a conversation with a man who had dined daily at that soup kitchen for many years. I asked him what he liked most about Our Daily Bread, and he told me, “I like how people look me in the eye

here. I can go all day without anyone making eye contact with me, but when I come here, people actually look at me and talk to me. That's a nice feeling." This conversation has stuck with me for years. I suspect that this man came to that soup kitchen daily not only because he was hungry for a hot meal but also because he was hungry for human connection. Even simple eye contact made that man feel recognized, valued, and respected.

Everyone needs human connection. Indeed, a desire to serve and connect with patients was the major driving force behind my own decision to pursue a career in medicine, and I wrote about this commitment to compassion in my personal statement. There have been many times throughout medical school that I have revisited that document to reconnect with my purpose for being here. After long, arduous evenings in the library or lonely weekends with my only company being a stack of textbooks, it was important for me to remind myself that relationships and genuine human connection were the key reasons why I wanted to be a doctor. Without that context, my studying became an exhausting and blind pursuit of knowledge.

I have also needed reminders about the importance of connection as I enter the clinical years of my education. I have loved my third year of medical school thus far, but there have been many times where I have seen medicine fall short of ideal. Oftentimes, the physician only has a few minutes to spend with each patient – a familiar problem for many who are reading this. Rules, regulations, and the pressures of huge patient caseloads weigh heavily on clinicians, and this can get in the way of genuine connection with patients. This is one of the many reasons why the Magis Clinic and other free clinics like it are so special. In these settings, students, physicians, pharmacists, nurses, and other volunteer clinicians can spend as much time with each patient as they like. While balancing this luxury of time with the obligation to provide care to the many people who need it, this relative freedom allows for an environment that fosters listening, compassion, and connection. This is necessary and meaningful for both patient and clinician. The patient is seen, heard, and valued, and the clinician's fire is rekindled.

The gentleman with the briefcase and I shared forty minutes together in that cramped little room. I was dressed in business clothes and had a binder full of resources to share. The man was dressed in tattered sweatpants and had a story to share. We came from different places and backgrounds, but we were not all that different. We both came to the Magis Clinic seeking a genuine human connection that day. I believe we found it.