



Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

Beyond Diagnosis: Compassion and Quality of Life in Medical Care

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“Our ultimate goal, after all, is not a good death but a good life to the very end.”

—Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*

As a Child Life volunteer at my local children’s hospital, I had a list of 25 patients to see on Friday mornings. I often dashed around the hospital from one wing to the next, one room to the next, and one toy cabinet to the next, trying my best to give each child a choice in a place where they often had none. As I passed room 344 in the cancer unit, I saw a white paper on the door: an end-of-life tree, a sign used to indicate that the patient has only a few days of life left.

During rounds he was known as a 5-year-old male with acute myeloid leukemia, but I knew him as Andre. I had just been in Andre’s room the week before asking him about what toys he liked and then bringing him a basket full of options. He asked me to play with him and I stayed for hours, at one

point, wheeling him around the entire hospital in a plastic red wagon to avoid any mention of the word “bored.” I remember seeing the guilt disappear from his mother’s face when she realized Andre hadn’t been alone while she worked and cared for her other children. It was a small victory that held great personal meaning, as I knew I had made a difference not only in the life of Andre, but in the life of a mother carrying the weight of an ill child. The next time I went to visit him, the paper tree seemed to mock me. It symbolized the pain and suffering that comes with death. Then, Andre’s mom stepped out.

“Gracias por todo,” she said, with a solemn look on her face.

I realized that sometimes it’s just as much the compassion a physician provides to the person as it is the medical treatment the patient receives-- one provides healing while the other provides comfort. The comfort a physician imparts during treatment makes a patient’s life easier to live. The paper tree was no longer a symbol of death, but rather the life that Andre was living.

“We want autonomy for ourselves and safety for those we love.”

—Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*

To this day I remember the fear in my father’s voice as he asked the ICU nurse a question not knowing if he could handle the response.

“When can we expect to bring her home?” my father asked. I watched the nurse gently place her hand on my father’s shoulder. “I don’t know if she’ll be going home,” she replied. Tears flooded my mother’s eyes. My sister--my best friend, my rock--was dying of septic shock in the same ICU where, as college students, we both once volunteered, and no one knew why.

Although my sister did not have a paper tree on her door, she lay in an ICU bed for weeks, and, with each passing 6AM rounds, she soon became the “21 year-old female with severe, decompensated septic shock due to an unknown diagnosis.” It becomes easy to start thinking of a patient’s illness as a part of their identity rather than a label. After almost a week of not hearing my sister’s voice or seeing her eyes open, I started believing the label. Dr. Mughrabi knocked on the sliding glass doors, looked me in the eyes, and declared: “I haven’t given up hope, so you shouldn’t either.” A

few days later, she handed me a stack of papers with lab work results and medical journal articles. “We found the source- a tubal cyst. I booked an OR.” For our family, Dr. Mughrabi had turned that paper tree of death to one of life.

I have always seen medicine as a science motivated by humanity. It combines the two aspects I value most-- the systematic nature of science and the unsystematic nature of humanity. When practicing medicine, doctors are presented with patients and families at their weakest times, but receive the privilege of providing care to build them up to their strongest. As a physician, I want to impart hope through medicine and use my passion to strive to define a person’s illness, so it never defines them.

"Being Mortal" has become a guiding beacon in my journey as a future physician. In his thought-provoking book, Gawande delves into the intricate intersection of medicine, mortality, and the human experience, challenging traditional notions of healthcare and end-of-life care. As I continue through my medical journey, Gawande’s narrative serves as a stark reminder that medicine extends beyond the diagnosis and treatment of diseases; it is about understanding the individual’s values, desires, and the complex interplay of life and

death. It has inspired me to approach patient care with a compassionate and holistic perspective that emphasizes quality of life.

As I progress in my medical career, the principles and insights from "Being Mortal" remain deeply embedded in my approach to patient care. I am committed to fostering open dialogues with patients, incorporating their values into decision-making processes, and advocating for systemic changes that prioritize the humanity and dignity of individuals facing the inevitable complexities of mortality. Atul Gawande's "Being Mortal" has not only shaped my perspective on healthcare but has become a guiding force, propelling me to contribute to a healthcare system that is both compassionate and responsive to the profound challenges of life and death.

"We've been wrong about what our job is in medicine. We think our job is to ensure health and survival. But really it is larger than that. It is to enable well-being."

—Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*

Biography



Devki Patel, is currently a first-year M.D. candidate at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine. Beyond her academic pursuits, Devki is actively engaged in addressing gender and equity issues within the medical field while also demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing healthcare disparities. As a dedicated member of the AMWA Gender and Equity Task Force, she contributes to initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity and promoting equality in healthcare. Combining her passion for medicine with a commitment to advocacy and compassionate care, Devki is shaping a future where healthcare is not only about expertise but also about fairness and accessibility for all.