

The Best Medicine - Listening, Laughing, and Being Human

Susheel Khetarpal

This time last year, I was getting goosebumps thinking about what was awaiting me in my first year of medical school. I was finally going to begin learning the intricacies of human physiology, unique pathologies, and the best treatments and drugs that can help better my future patients. However, now after nearly completing my first year of medical school, I realize these fantasies did not fully live up to my expectations. A typical day for me: re-learning much of the basic sciences that I dreaded in undergrad, packing random detail after random detail into my brain in the library while quickly forgetting what I had read the previous hour, and (scariest of all) often times forgetting about the patient...patients like S, who I was fortunate to meet in a hectic week in mid-April.

I was particularly quite low leading up to my visit with S. I was burnt out - an unending volume of neuroanatomy being thrown at me coupled with a low emotional health after a breakup left me in pretty apathetic shape. I was tired, unmotivated, and for the first time beginning to question the point of my medical school education. *When I am going to get the tools to actually better treat patients?* At the same time, S was struggling to get through his own stresses. Luckily, for the both of us, our worlds collided for about 45 minutes on a random Thursday afternoon as I was tasked with meeting and learning about what brought S and his daughter K to the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

S is a middle-aged African American, father to K, his 21 month year old daughter with arthrogryposis, a congenital systemic joint contracture disease. I was warned by the resident before entering K's room that "S was quite reserved and edgy this morning, but he has lot to say." He was lying on the window side couch just being at peace with himself as his daughter K, attached to numerous wires and monitors, was sleeping soundly in her crib just a couple feet away. He directed me to sit down next to him and after some quick and superficial

introductions asked me in a stern voice, “so what do you need to know about her?” He quickly laid out K’s birth history, symptoms, and current problems.

I was speechless. She had been through so much already in just 21 months - surgeries, drugs, and therapies...topics that were especially appealing to me in the fall when I was just entering medical school. Yet, at that moment, I was not really interested in learning more about K’s condition; instead I wanted to get to know more about the guy in front of me. He looked exhausted but still somehow full of energy. I decided to ask S something that I now realize not many people had cared to find out: “how are you doing with all of this?”

Our conversation took a quick and fascinating turn after I asked that question. S’s eyes opened up, he put his phone down on the counter in front of us, sunk back into the couch, and began telling me the whole story. He detailed his complicated family history, which includes still supporting for several children he had with his ex-wife as well as the two children he has now, K and her twin sister (who also has medical complications), with his current wife. However, K’s mother has been quite overwhelmed by the medical situation of her children and had left her family last week. S says he is still in minor contact with his wife, but it’s out of his hands to get her to come back to Pittsburgh.

Our conversation drifted to many other subjects. S chronicled his childhood, especially how he supported so many of his siblings, including being a role model for his brother who made some poor life choices and is now incarcerated. After high school, S joined the army and held military positions across the world. He was close to death numerous times. He faced racial discrimination in the army, was thrown into undercover life-threatening projects and missions he was not assigned to, and had to literally fight for his survival sometimes on a daily basis. His service was unfortunately cut short early because he became partially disabled.

I was at a loss of words learning about S’s life journey. It seemed simply unimaginable how someone could persevere through all of these challenges and still sit here with me by his daughter’s side...but with a smile! When I looked at S as he described his story, he was remarkably bright and cheerful, cracking jokes, throwing in unforgettable tangent stories, all while keeping a genuine smile plastered to his face.

I had to ask. “How do you do this? How do you keep going, especially after all that you have been through?!”

He first answered this question by talking about his hobbies of fixing things around the house - painting, installing, construction are some of S’s

favorite ways to relax and enjoy himself. When I probed deeper though, his answer really hit home. “Like anything that hits you in life, you have to learn to laugh and just do it. Keep pushing through and get it done...All of the challenges in your life are going to be there whether you want them there or not. You can choose to sit there and mope about it, but at the end of the day all you have done is waste your time, other people’s time, and you still haven’t accomplished anything. If something has to get done, just buckle down and do it. And if you gonna do it, do it with a smile. Laugh. Enjoying what you do in life is key to living.” Later on, S said “you have to remember how blessed we are to live on this earth, to keep breathing god’s air, and to be able to just live. It could all be so much worse - I could be like her as he pointed to his daughter in the crib less than 10 feet away. I have so much to be happy about - I can walk, think for myself, and live my life. And when she gets better after her treatments here, we are going to take it one step at a time, and she is gonna get through life just like me, just like you, like everyone else does.”

My conversation with S, only an hour in what seemed like an unending week, reminded me that our tenacity and support system help us overcome the challenges in front of us. But, why do we do continue to fight and struggle? The answer, which S showed me, is to keep smiling, laughing and enjoying the blessing that is life. The latter is something I have often times taken for granted - so many times I get caught up in the low points in my life, fixating on how I wish things were better...how I could be better at memorizing, increasing productivity, being more creative, and balancing all that with a social life. However, I really do not take the time to think about the autonomy I have, that I can walk anywhere I need to go, and can use my healthy brain to its full potential. Notably during my conversation with S, I had recurring memories of my adolescent years when I helped care for my dadimaa (paternal grandmother) who suffered from severe Alzheimer’s disease and dementia when I was in middle school. Growing up, I could see my energetic grandmother quickly deteriorate and forget how to perform basic tasks, such as not remembering my name or forgetting how to eat. Thinking about dadimaa and K make me remember to be thankful for all that I have.

Another big take home that I learned about from my brief time with S was how we as future doctors can make the biggest impact to our patients. Learning how to diagnose, document, and treat diseases are paramount to practice of a physician, but I did not appreciate firsthand that just by engaging your fellow human being and doing nothing more than just sitting down, letting others talk/vent/share their life with you can help accomplish so much. I did not know anything about K’s disease, let alone how to even pronounce it when the resident first told me about her before I entered the room that day. At the end of the day, however, that really did not matter - I was there to engage, learn, and empathize

with S as he let me, a complete stranger, into his life more than a lot of people in his life.

Unfortunately, my story has a bittersweet ending. Less than a week after meeting S and K, I received a call from the resident, who had introduced me to this family, informing me that K had passed away unexpectedly.

It was a lot to process. It was Friday afternoon, I had just finished my neuroscience exam, and was ready to get a break from school and unwind over a much needed weekend. However, there I was aimlessly walking around the floors of Scaife Hall on a Friday afternoon, trying to process what the resident told me ... “you were probably one of the last people to have a real, human conversation with S before his daughter passed away.”

I know that I never will be able to understand the kind of pain and suffering S and his wife are going through with the loss of their daughter. There is no end to their grief...never a time they will not think about K, what she would look like, the memories they would have with her, and what she would grow up to become and accomplish in her life. What kept coming back into my head that day, however, was my conversation with S, and just how thankful I was to have had met him and his daughter, and how blessed I was at the moment to be...living. My only hope is that S also got something out of our conversation...a chance to reflect, appreciate what he has, and be at peace at where he is now as he processes another chapter in his life.