

Patient Pathography- Saved by the Volunteers

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“Dios míos! Dios míos!! My heart is going to come out of my chest; it can’t stop beating so fast, I can’t breathe... ..help!” Those were the last words I remember speaking before waking up the next day at the hospital. Per what I could make out from what seemed like a dozen different doctors I had a "hyperglycemic crisis." My blood sugar was in the 900s, one of the doctors said that I should have been in a coma, I spent more than a week in the hospital, and I left there with a diagnosis that would change my life, type 2 diabetes mellitus.

I am not sure what happens to anyone else after waking up from a near death experience, but I instantly started the wheels on the early days of my life. We grew up in Mexico, I have five brothers and two sisters, my mother stayed at home to take care of us, and my dad worked on a farm. Once a boy in the house turned 8, we could join the grownups on the farm which allowed us to earn an allowance. My goal that summer was to buy my first bike, that goal took two summers. Times were tough, but as a kid, I never felt that I was missing out on much. The way we lived, was the way that most of my friends lived, so to me, this was what a normal life looked like, and I didn't realize how poor my country of origin truly was until I moved here at the age of twenty-five.

Once reminiscing was no longer what my brain sought to get through the hospital stay, the denial started to take over. How did my blood sugar even get this high? I mean sure being from Mexico meant that my diet had been mostly white rice-- which apparently is not much more than refined sugar-- and don't even get me started on our tres leches cake --an absolute must-have at any time of the day, at least once a day; but had these things really got me to this place in life? My younger brother was diagnosed with diabetes and because of this had to have

his left leg amputated a few years ago. But my brother is a big man, 330 lbs at 5’10 who never cared much about the way he ate. On the other hand, I was 5’11 at 130 lbs, I work three jobs, and for the most part, ride my bicycle between jobs all over town. This simply does not make sense; this could not be where thirty years of life have now brought me.

Eventually, I was discharged from the hospital, with a disease that I knew nothing about managing properly, and with the duty of finding a physician who would teach me how to handle this new way of life. Surprisingly, even with three jobs I still had no health insurance, which meant another challenge. Thankfully, one of the case managers knew of this clinic Volunteer in Medicine, (VIM) a place where health professionals volunteered their time treating people like me, people without health insurance. At my first visit, I was welcomed by the Medical Director and his medical student; my blood sugar was 425. The visit lasted over an hour and a half. I felt so cared for that I just knew that I would have to get this high sugar under control, I could not bear the thought of disappointing them.

We worked on a chronic care plan together where we determined my short and long term goals, as well as the obstacles that could keep me from reaching those goals. They gave me a log to keep track of blood sugar and equipped me with the tools I would need to reach these goals such as a glucometer and my insulin. My short-term goal was to get my sugar below two hundred. I remember walking out of the clinic that day thinking that I may have been overzealous with my goal. But to my surprise, I was not. And after many visits and a few adjustments to the insulin sliding scale, I had accomplished that goal plus more. One of the biggest challenges that I still face is working three jobs. Having to work so much means that I often resort to fast food restaurants and/or whatever snack is available at the time when I finally get a chance to eat. My eating habits never bothered me before, but now that I genuinely want to do better I constantly bear the guilt for doing what I must do.

The other day, my doc and I revisited my chronic care plan, and we spoke about my struggle making healthier choices while on the jobs; she made some thoughtful suggestions, like prepping meals for a few days at a time and keeping a non-perishable healthy snack on hand. We both realize that with my time constraint doing these things may not always be achievable, but we decided that even three times a week could make a significant difference; It was good to hear that there was a solution to my dilemma. I initially vented about the issue to one of my friends named Diego, and he advised me to quit one of my jobs. My family situation would not allow it, and for a moment there I felt helpless and even condemned, but now I feel better; I can do something to improve my situation, that makes such a difference.

Lately, I have been doing very well. I no longer go to the VIM every two weeks. My doc has been so pleased with my progress, he makes me feel like such an excellent patient. I am still working my three jobs, and most of my sugar readings have been within normal range. I now help my brother in Mexico manage his diabetes, his very grateful for me, and our relationship has grown tremendously. I am thinking of going back to school, getting my GED, eventually, do work that will allow me to make a difference in the life of someone like myself... the health field has made quite the impression on me....