

# The MSPress Journal

Vol 9 | No. 1 | 2022

Creative  
Writing

## My First Experience With a Patient's Loved One

Elahe Kia<sup>1</sup>

1. Bond University, Gold Coast, QLD Australia

As part of my medical school's curriculum, students partake in various clinical visits in the community from the outset of the degree, before commencing full-time hospital placement in our final 2 years of medical school. As a second-year medical student, I was scheduled to visit a dementia unit for a morning. I was particularly keen to see how the neurological and communicative disability in dementia patients resembled that of stroke patients, whom I had had significant experience with in the past. I arrived at the unit thinking I would meet a couple of patients, observe how they functioned, and identify where they required support. The analytical mindset I entered the clinic with was quickly abandoned as I found myself in an intimate discussion with a patient's wife who visited that morning. The patient, who I will name 'Joseph', left the room momentarily. At this time, his wife, 'Sue' dropped the positive façade she had been maintaining in his presence.

Sue told me about her admiration for Joseph, her sadness regarding his condition, and the hurt she felt that their adopted children and in-laws hardly maintained contact. She spoke of the guilt she felt for not seeing signs of his decline earlier before telling me about her current isolation, fears for the future, and her disappointment in herself for not being stronger now. She was visibly upset, and I too became emotional. I was completely engaged in that moment and couldn't help but feel her pain. It had not been my intention but suddenly I was swept up in her story,

relating aspects to people I knew or experiences I had encountered. She apologized for burdening me and “ruining my morning”. I felt helpless – unequipped to be able to meaningfully assist her or relieve any of her challenges – but decided that letting her express herself and ensuring she felt heard was the very least I could do.

Thinking about previous moments in my life where both friends and strangers have confided in me plays heavily on my mind from time to time. The often abrupt goodbyes and return to normality would leave me with a strange feeling of angst and guilt. It is after these conversations that I ask myself: was I probing? Did they regret talking to me? Did bringing up those topics make their day harder?

As I reflect on my conversation with Sue, I know I did not probe. I listened. I’m not sure if other students in my position would have continued the conversation or, out of their discomfort, have ended it. For everything to pour out of her, I understood she didn’t have enough support in her life. As future doctors, we cannot forget the burden carried by our patients’ loved ones. Furthermore, there is great power in simply listening and being there. I gained an appreciation for the reality that every encounter I will have in my career has the potential to be this demanding, however. I always want to remain empathetic, but when I soon hold the responsibility and skills to be able to really help, I don’t want to be overtaken by emotions to the point where I can’t enact all those skills I have been trained for. To be present for all my patients, I must integrate a level of detachment. Otherwise, I run the risk of getting emotionally overwhelmed and burnt-out by a few.

---