

Reflections

The Hands that Serve are Holier than the Lips that Pray**Hina Latif***King Edward Medical University Lahore*

We are travelers on a cosmic journey, stardust, swirling and dancing in the eddies and whirlpools of infinity. Life is eternal. We have stopped for a moment to encounter each other, to meet, to love, to share. This is a precious moment. It is a little parenthesis in eternity. – Paulo Coelho

Ohh it's late, I must sleep, tomorrow is a long working day, morning round, outdoor duty n then 24hrs emergency day ward stay... a mere thought of it made me shut my eyes in fraction of a second with the book in my hand and a mind numb by these brainy quotes of Paulo Coelho.

The morning hours turned to be super hectic as expected having no chance to take a sip of water for a second even in this hot sunny day. "This is a precious moment" Huhh. With a heavy heart I nodded my head to shake off the last lines I read before a sound sleep last night. "Focus on OPD girl, hurry up". OPD was full of patients who needed my attention more. "We have stopped for a moment to encounter each other, to meet, to love, to share" indeed being a doctor you relive this quote every single day, every single hour and in my opinion that's what keep me going to serve my patients in the best possible way. Every patient is a story or I must say every person is a story in him. Each day you write a new page of your life. Be it is just about your usual routine work or seeing some old friend. But in a doctor's life it's more than that. Your days are marked by your patients; your whole routine revolves around them and your duties. Some days you go out of the way for your patient, someday an old recovered patient show up out of nowhere, someday an unusual patient case makes you remember that day for years to come. I always cherished this patient calendar of mine rather than the usual one. To me it was more satisfying, even a grimace of smile on my patient's face make me forget about every single ache I had because of this frantically manic routine.

Indeed life is a blend of different emotions. It's a



journey filled with lessons, adversity, anguish, glee, celebrations and special moments that ultimately lead us to our destination, our purpose in life. The road will not always be smooth; in fact, throughout our travel, we encounter many challenges. Some of these challenges will test our courage, strengths, weaknesses, and faith. Along the way, we may stumble upon obstacles that come between the paths that we are destined to take. With some intense thoughts about journey of life, I headed to indoor block to update my patient-doctor calendar.

It was an emergency day ward call. The house was full with multiple critical patients striving for life, some with air hunger, uncontrolled hypertension leading to stroke, some with wet lungs and another with acute kidney injury due to dehydration. There was a bunch of attendants all around with edgy faces and apprehensive look. Emergency day calls are always like this sir? My house officer asked as it was his very early start of the house job. Yes Dr. khan I replied

while moving to the 1st bed for my round and having a detailed look at my patients.

“Doctor today's admission has more number of critical patients. You will be on your toes I guess” my staff nurse on round informed me. Oh, don't worry staff, we will manage InShaAllah. With these words I moved to the next bed trying to hide all the fears of losing any one of my patient whose only hope was me for the upcoming hours of the day and night. Moving from bed to bed and examining each patient in detail, with a lot of interruptions in the form of constant new admission and their concerned family members along with some SOS orders, took me more than usual to complete the round. “Doctor does have a look at the files of these very patients especially the treatment ticket.” Staff handed me over few files of critical patients.

“Ok staff; do send their attendants one by one after half an hour to my duty office”.

“Sure doctor”; she replied.

I wanted to have a full picture of the patient's condition and their lab investigations before explaining and counseling the attendants. Let's meet the families' Dr. khan, I asked my house physician after thoroughly going through the files of my patients. One after the other we met attendants of different patients, having tears rolling on cheeks, nervous faces, trembling hands, wobbling and lips constantly praying while listening to us, deep inside heavy hearts with an unpredicted fear of losing their loved ones. Indeed the walls of the hospital have heard more prayers than the walls of the mosque. Hope and reality lie in inverse proportions inside the wall of the hospital. There is something about hospital walls; though only made of bricks and plaster. When you're inside them the noise, the reality of the teeming city beyond, disappears; it's just outside the door. But inside it's a total different world full of most overwhelming emotions, sometimes magical ones or... mostly more atrocious.

It was the early part of the night. Somehow my patients managed to survive with my facile efforts. With a feeling of being able to manage and make my patients survive somehow I was standing at the medicine counter, monitors were beeping, infusion pumps functioning, inotropic supports working fine, I tried to have a glance at each and every patient of the ward. “Situation is under control doctor, you have

survived the day but night is there to handle” my staff nurse said while filling the micro-burettes for the patients. In a reply all I could have was a silly smile on my face.

A few minutes later an attendant just screamed doctor help please help. I was just heading to duty office to have some food as I haven't had the chance after breakfast. My junior colleague rushed to the bed followed by me. The patient was in gasping condition. Despite of all the efforts to resuscitate him, he didn't survive. The patient has aspirated the food which attendant gave him regardless of all the warnings by staff to not to feed him as he was in semi-conscious state. A few minutes earlier, he was little bit conscious, abstracted but and silently observing me doing lumbar puncture of the other patient next to him. He was in uremic encephalopathy for last few days and had just gained consciousness this evening. Death is so unpredictable, it just happens-so suddenly.

While the routine ward activity was going on another patient collapsed who was down with sepsis for last few days. Another expiry, another life is no more. Down and out, I pushed myself to help another patient in improving her air hunger who had metastatic breast cancer. She was insisting to go home for a day only to get her daughter married in her life. And I was not able to let her go as she was on high flow oxygen which was hard to manage at home that too being from a lower income family. Why life has so many challenges, why it is so hard on some people? Indeed poverty is above all.

Why is life so hard?

But we never understand,
we go through many obstacles,
doing all we can.

We travel left and right,
and side to side,
through good and bad,
and the need to hide.

Why is life so hard?

We all just need to try,
make the world a better place,
not filled with hate and lies.

In an attempt to make it better for my patients, I was demonstrating Nasogastric intubation procedure for gastric lavage to my junior doctor. He was a young

male who presented with upper gastrointestinal bleed because of alcoholism. For the last few hours he was constantly bleeding. His O negative blood group was making it difficult for his wife and a 2 years old kid to arrange for transfusion. The constant beep of low blood pressure on the monitor was making situation grave. After explaining the whole situation to the family, I asked staff to call blood bank if they have any pint of O negative blood. "I don't want to lose this young boy at all; I will try every possible mean for him." Turning a deaf ear to all the voices inside my head, I called emergency endoscopy unit to keep a slot reserved for this boy as soon as I have any pint of blood in hand.

Meanwhile that metastatic breast cancer lady wasn't copping up with her dyspnea. Her Oxygen saturation was constantly falling despite of all efforts. Her daughter was in constant tears the moment she entered the ward. "I don't know if I should send her home just to have some last moments with her family and loved ones or should I make her stay here for her betterment" a doctor is helpless sometimes. "When a divine decree comes, the physician loses his skill". His medicine does harm instead of being beneficial. Being a doctor you face situations like this most often in intensive care unit.

Here I was standing amid ward with so many sick patients around, that young boy with status epilepticus whose condition was resistant to medical treatment, middle age male with hemorrhagic stroke and a GCS of 3/15, another young boy with huge size right atrial myxoma, and above all that metastatic breast cancer lady and that alcoholic patient all giving me a constant jitter and shudder to my spine. In the next few hours I lost two of them. I hardly had any expiry on most of my duties; to me it wasn't less than a nightmare. The death toll had risen to 5 till the last part of the night. Every single time any patient needed resuscitation, I could feel the warmth of those stares at my back, everyone in the ward focused on the point if was able to save that patient or not. For three consecutive patients it was a sheer disappointment for them with me standing like a goof declaring the death of the patient which they already knew, making me question my mere presence as a doctor, a healer who was failing at being a helping hand in making my patients survive.

To me, it seemed they all are sure of my

incompetence. I was helpless in saving these terminally ill patients, nor was able to explain the prognosis to each and every patient and attendant in the ward. The mistrust I had seen setting in few horrified eyes was shattering my courage and stamina to go through the rest of my duty. How I will face them all again if I end up in the situation of resuscitating a patient again?

While I was sitting on the counter after declaring another patients death, head down, drooping shoulders, tearful eyes accounting for what I am lacking to help my patients survive, staff nurse whispered; "doctor you are doing your best. I have never seen so many expiries at your duty nor have I seen you with such a low morale before. Muster up yourself. Better take some rest until any patient calls for you."

"No staff, I am fine here but definitely I need to figure it out for my patients. I don't want to lose any more patients."

Ignoring the echo of that whisper of a patient's attendant (oh, another down omg) while resuscitating the last death, I tried to check blood pressure of that alcoholic patient whose monitor was constantly beeping. His blood pressure was un-recordable at the moment with missed heartbeat. "Staff does bring emergency tray and ECG machine immediately." No one showed up for a while when I was trying to handle the patient with profuse bleeding. Staff! Hurry up please. "Another patient?" oh GOD helps me please. The mere thought of it was breaking my heart. Oh the staff just received a call from intensive care unit to check upon that status epilepticus patient who was just shifted to ventilator. Suddenly I saw few hands around, someone bringing the tray, another one checking blood sugar of the patient who used to check his patient's blood sugar at home, another one rushing to blood bank that had a blood group of O negative. His wife was standing cringed to the door with her 2 years old kid, in desperation with tears shedding uninterruptedly from her eyes.

The situation was getting critical with every passing second; suddenly the pulse sensor started beeping, "Oh No!!! Arrhythmia? VT? Oh GOD save my patient", and there I had 2 more hands brining the defibrillator around the bed corner. My teary eyes were fogging the whole scene for me; pushing them

back I tried to sustain the rhythm. My ears were keen to hear a normal rhythm sensor when all I had was just NO SOUND. CPR I shouted unintentionally when my staff nurse showed up at the scene all of a sudden. Soon the rhythm sensor sustained its normality. Oh ALLAH OH ALLAH....THANK YOU FOR SAVING MY PATIENT, THANKS YOU FOR SAVING MY LIFE. All I had were eyes full of tears around, with some sense of gratitude. The trust that was shaken few hours before was somehow reclaimed but this time with a lot more helping hands than just two around. Indeed "The Hands that Serve are Holier than the Lips that Pray" and I was so blessed to have so many holier hands around in saving a life!!!