

## Mirror, Mirror on the wall

It has been about eight months since I first started my residency training in the U.S. As a foreign medical graduate (FMG) I was pretty excited to move to a different country and begin a new life. I was happy to train in one of the best institutions in New York. It was a culmination of all the years of hard work and exams that I went through from medical school and beyond. So, here I was going through the routine life as a resident when we were suddenly put into the front lines of a pandemic which we knew little about. This was a situation I had not anticipated. At medical school, we were taught about the different pandemics that affected the world such as the plague, Spanish influenza and so on. However, I never thought I would be in the middle of one especially in the modern age where medicine has evolved beyond measure.

“Hello, May I speak to the doctor taking care of my father / mother?” This was the conversation starter of the innumerable phone calls I have attended to during these last two months. It has been my sole responsibility to call up the loved ones of all the patients I care for and tell them about the changes in the health of their husband, wife, father, mother, brother or sister. Being a doctor is never easy. You carry on your shoulders the responsibility of a person’s life. You are the person who gets to know someone’s vulnerability as a person. You get to be the person who is able to save a person who is inches away from death and return them back to their family. It is a burden we choose to bear the moment we step into corridors of a hospital. Yet nothing could have prepared us for what we have seen in the past few weeks.

I remember admitting a patient who had possible symptoms related to COVID-19. He came in with a high fever and his chest x-ray showed a picture with a high likelihood of the virus present in his lungs. He was found to be positive on testing. However he was the picture of perfect health since he did not require any oxygen to help support his breathing. I remember walking into his room every morning with a pulse oximeter in hand and putting it on his index finger. While waiting to see if his oxygen saturation was within normal limits I would have a conversation about his life, his family, his job and so on. It is part of my profession to always

understand the story behind every person I see and treat. It allows me to understand the human behind the symptoms and understand his / her rationale behind their medical decisions and management of their health. In turn I shared a little of my life as a resident and the challenges I face on a daily basis. I believe these conversations allowed us both to learn to trust each other. After seeing him, I would always update his loved one about his progress. Slowly around day four he started to deteriorate. His oxygen needs went up and it became difficult for him to breathe by himself. I found myself helpless since this was clearly due to the viral attack and all the new modes of treatment initiated on him were failing. It was difficult to watch a person who walked in looking completely fine being wheeled into the ICU. A few days later he passed away in the ICU. The news of his death hit me hard. To just think about it, I used to talk and laugh with him while doing my daily exams. To think that I used to tell him that once he got better he needed to ensure he took better care of his health.

Life is always surprising. It tends to throw us off balance when we least expect it to. I may never understand why a seemingly healthy person went from being well to dying from this pandemic. I may never comprehend when patients whom I thought would not survive walked away completely healed. But what it has shown me is that being a doctor is a privilege and a blessing. It was my blessing to share in those last few days my patient had. It was a privilege to be part of the success story in my patients who walked away safe. It was a privilege to hear my patient's stories and be part of their family for a few minutes every day while updating them of their loved one's progress. At the end of the day when I look into the mirror in my bedroom I see in myself a part of every patient I treated during this pandemic. I see the grandfather who wanted to play with his grandkids one last time. I see the mother who worried about what her family had for dinner that day. I see the father who wanted his daughter to continue her studies and do well at school. Finally as an aspiring internist I see myself changed and a different person than who I was a few weeks ago. I am a physician who will always be happy to be part of his patient's stories and count his blessings every day.

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