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Physician News

CHIEF OF STAFF MESSAGE

This month we are going to switch things up a bit. Instead of listening to my bi-monthly monologue, you will be treated to a great piece of writing. Niren Angle, MD, our Vice Chief of Staff at Concord, wrote the following during a recent hospitalization. I find that our own stories are often very powerful and thought-provoking.

Russell Rodriguez, MD, Chief of Staff John Muir Medical Center, Concord

Life's Little Wake-Ups and The Fruit Of Kindness



Niren Angle, MD
Vice Chief of Staff, Concord

I am not a particularly religious man, or more to the point, I am intellectually supremely confident that there is something beyond us, a power that we don't and will never comprehend just as the human brain is incapable of understanding infinity. Yet, I am not "religious." The current age is one of scientific discovery tainted by arrogance about its limitations, as well as one of unsophisticated empiricism. It is a mentality that is an outgrowth of the current explosion in knowledge but it suffers from a sober understanding of the limitations of such knowledge. We can tell what happens, how it happens, and many times how we can modify the behavior of the event but we still don't know why it happens. We can identify the proximate cause but not the essence of the what the cause of said event is or was.

With that prelude, I would like to tell a remarkable, at least to me, story. I turned 50 in June and one would never know it from what I am told. I am in good shape, I work out regularly, I do not and have never smoked, I drink a glass of wine most nights, I take aspirin daily, I take omega 3 fatty acids daily, and my eating is fastidiously healthy. I work quite hard, as a vascular surgeon and I love what I do, and do it with a passion.

On June 13, a fateful Sunday, I was at the gym working out like I always do and I developed a vague discomfort in the upper chest. No back pain, no diaphoresis, no nausea, no radiation - no nothing but a vague 3/10 at best discomfort in the anterior upper chest on the left and the right. I could not make it go away. It went down to 1/10 and I went home but it didn't resolve completely. Due to the wisdom of my wife, Kim, she took me to the ED at John Muir, and that is where the remarkable journey started.

John Muir Health is a unique and remarkable institution and I have had the privilege of working here for two and a half years. My career has taken me through some great academic institutions as well as a couple of non-academic



institutions and I have enjoyed all of them. John Muir Health is unique as it has an academic organizational mindset, with regards to evidence-based medicine, quality, level of care, and sophistication of care. What makes this unique is the fact that the people who work here – physicians, nurses, surgical techs, cath lab techs, physical therapists, security guards – all are exceptionally good people, with few exceptions.

This would be highlighted to me as my visit to the ED became a surreal experience that would open my eyes in ways that surprised me. I will expound on this a little later, assuming that the reader has not drifted off into a coma.

I walked into the ED, and the first remarkable moment was the security guard to whom I waved and said hello, whenever I see him, who went back to get someone to attend to me as there was no one at the triage desk at that moment. I was fine, not looking ill, but he cared enough to do something that did not need to be done. I was taken back to the ED expeditiously and an ECG done. I watched the paper come out and I knew I was having a myocardial infarction. I looked at my wife who also knew as she was looking at the ECG as well. I told her across the room that I would need to go to the Cath Lab, where ironically, I had done a case less than 24 hours ago.

Her usual calm demeanor and steely strength was giving way to tears as she tried to hold her composure (and she did) but I had visions of everything that could happen – infarction, arrest, etc., and all I could think of was that I may never see her or my daughter, or my parents again. It is a very discomfiting moment, even to one as quintessentially confident a man as me, to realize that I had to go to the Cath Lab now, not 20 minutes from now, not later on, but now. There are no goodbyes other than a quick kiss as they wheel you up.

As a surgeon, it is exceptionally important to realize this as we take a patient to the OR or to the Cath Lab. Intellectually, I always did, but never did I realize how important it is – that goodbye – until I viscerally felt it at that moment. Kim was calling my parents and my daughter, Athena, and I can only imagine what everyone was experiencing, which to me was much more important than what I was feeling.

The rest was revealing in the most amazing and gratifying way, as it highlighted what it means to be so privileged to heal the ill. That means so much more than the procedure or administration of the drug or whatever other intervention is needed to turn the tide. It means respect, and kindness, and compassion – this you cannot teach. You can only find people that possess it, invest in them to make them part of the organization, nurture them and embed in the organization the culture that defines who we are and what we do.

The ED staff, nurses, and the ED physician were remarkable – exceptionally quick, calm, compassionate to me and my wife, and possessed of a calm that makes the patient feel like it will be ok. And then, I was wheeled up to the Cath Lab where the techs and nurses that I work with all the time were seeing me in the unfamiliar position of being on the gurney. Marlie, Brandon, Wade, and Chris – I cannot thank you enough for the kind and superb care you provided your smartass surgeon. I have never been so comforted nor so proud to be a colleague of yours.

My cardiologists, Dr. Weiland, who did my angiogram and stent, and Dr. Lacey, who took care of me post-procedure and will take care of me going forward, are two remarkable, thoughtful, talented, and kind physicians who treated me with kindness, compassion, and solicitude that made me feel privileged to be their friend and colleague. David was the consummate calm professional, approaching my case as calmly as he would read a book, and did a fantastic job, which I was lucky enough to witness wide awake. Carolyn Lacey is one of the most superb, kind, pleasant, and exceptional cardiologists whom I have shared patients with and she attended to me post-operatively with humour, kindness, understanding, and exceptional medical care.

Drs. Weiland and Lacey rescued me, plain and simple, and allowed me to continue my journey in life.

In concert with this, I would be remiss if I did not mention my partners. I work with the most talented, kind, and most ethical physicians and surgeons that I have ever met, in more than 25 years of being in this world of surgery. When Kim called, they all descended en masse to the hospital and spent several hours with my wife and my parents. Murali

Dharan and Ramesh Veeragandham and Murali's wife drove in and not just to say hello but to spend an inordinate amount of time with my family. As did all my other partners.

A notable part of this experience that deserves some comment is the quality of staff here at John Muir Health. The nursing staff, the techs, the security guard – remarkable beyond description. The quality that distinguishes this staff from many others is the kindness, the patience, the understanding, and the solicitude of the people. The Cath Lab staff is exceptional, here and at Concord, and it is in the quality of work that they do, the attention to detail, and their kind nature. I have been privileged for two years to work with most of them and it is always a joy. It is even more of a joy when one is a patient undergoing the kind of procedure that I did.

An especially wonderful experience was being attended to by the nurses in the ICU. Emily, Lourdes, Stefaney, Leah and Nineveh – these were the ladies that made my stay a pleasure. The attention, the kindness, the exceptional care, administered with professionalism could not be more worthy of emulation. They were all beyond kind; they were smart, sharp, pleasant, and capable of handling any contingency with calm and ease. John Muir Health should be proud.

Which brings me to “The Patient,” a movie with William Hurt from 1991. For those who have not seen it, I would invite you to see it. As physicians and surgeons, we are inherently aware of the importance of quality nursing, respiratory therapists, physical and occupational therapists and the rest of the ancillary service staff; we know it, we respect it but it is truly difficult to appreciate it, until you are laying on a hospital bed, relatively helpless. We swing in, review labs, examine patients, and write orders, but the equally important aspect of care, whether it be on the floor, in the OR, in the ICU, in the Cath Lab, or in the ED, is making the patient feel secure and comforted – emotionally, cognitively, temperamentally, and physically – and tending to the sum total of these needs is the goal of patient care. The compendium of care can only occur when the entire entity composed of physicians, surgeons, nurses, techs, therapists and all the ancillary services that have no face to the

patient work as a team.

I am not a Polyanna and hate Polyanna-ish perspectives but this is not that. In the military, the concept of a true team is paramount to success and excelling at the mission ahead, but beyond that, it is the right thing to do and the proper way to live. The various components of life as well as of an enterprise must move seamlessly in concert with each other and only then can new heights of performance and excellence be attained.

We, and I speak as a surgeon, who are often caricatured as arrogant – not necessarily wrongly – have a duty and an imperative to inculcate this attitude by behavior, example, and insistence on excellence. At the end of the day, competence is the greatest form of compassion, although not the only form of it. We have superbly competent physicians, nurses, and technicians as well as all the ancillary staff, which if I were to enumerate, would risk a run-on sentence with no end in sight.

I am thankful to all at John Muir Health from the security guard Ramin to Jane Willemsen, Michelle Lopes, and all the doctors and nurses for the kindness, the compassion, and superb care that I got. And my friends, my colleagues across disciplines that visited and cared – they made me realize that one can make a difference just by being kind and respectful and pleasant.

It makes me proud that I work here and more importantly, like in “The Doctor,” I am a better physician and surgeon for having lived through it, in ways that I never would have learned otherwise.

William Osler wrote “The good physician treats the disease: the great physician treats the patient who has the disease.” His best-known saying was “Listen to your patient, he is telling you the diagnosis,” which emphasizes the importance of taking a good history. So, listen and stop talking – it will do everyone a world of good and will make us all smarter and better.

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