

4-30-2015

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Recommended Citation

Mohorek A. My time with E. *J Patient Cent Res Rev*. 2015;2:73-74. doi: 10.17294/2330-0698.1043

Journal of Patient-Centered Research and Reviews (JPCRR) is a peer-reviewed scientific journal whose mission is to communicate clinical and bench research findings, with the goal of improving the quality of human health, the care of the individual patient, and the care of populations.



My Time With E

Alyssa Mohorek, MD | Patient-Centered Essay

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I glanced once more at the chart, took a deep breath and knocked on E's hospital door. I opened the door to several familiar faces among a sea of strangers. As I prepared my typical, slightly awkward introduction of myself as a resident, my thoughts were cut off and my usual explanatory phrases no longer needed. One of the patient's daughters simply stated to the entire hospital room, "Everyone, this is Mom's doctor." It was the best introduction I ever received.

I know in health care we aren't supposed to have favorite patients, but in all honesty I must confess that I do have patients I enjoy more than others, and E was one of them. As I walked into her room that evening she looked so much different from the first time we had met. At that visit she had been full of vibrancy, her radiant eyes having a natural twinkle in them. E's eyes still had that twinkle, but now it also shared space with pain and the slightest suggestion of fear — fear of what was to come, fear that the pain would never go away and fear of abandoning her beautiful family.

E was dying of malignant mesothelioma. I had broken the news to her and her daughters several months prior to this hospitalization at what was the hardest visit I have had in residency. I had reviewed the pathology just shortly before that visit, and I dreaded having to tell E and her family such grave news. I wasn't even able to say a few words to E and her daughters before tears started streaming down my face. In that moment everyone in the room knew that I was about to say something terrible, and in that moment I finally choked out the words, "It's cancer." Despite the grave news, we all still thought there was a chance, based on a remarkably good positron emission tomography

scan, that her time left could be measured in years and not months.

But on this evening I knew that my hopes and prayers, along with those of her family, were not going to be granted. E did not have years left, only weeks. The majority of my time with her in the hospital that evening was centered around medicine: what the plan was, tests to be ordered and medications to be given. However, I only vaguely remember the program that we discussed; what I do remember is how E was surrounded by a beautiful family. I cherish the vision of her with all her loved ones near. E seemed like her old self as she pointed out her grandchildren and the sons I had not met. It gave me great comfort to know that someone I cared for was surrounded by such loving people.

Despite the fact that I knew in my heart that things would probably go quickly, I held out hope. Days later I found out that E had decided to enter a hospice facility. My colleagues notified me that the family and E had expressed that they would be willing to let me stop by and visit with E in the hospice facility. As I pulled into the hospice facility on a bright and sunny Saturday morning, I thought about how different this was from previous visits. No white coat. No stethoscope. No badge with the letters M.D. following my name. I was no longer going to see her as her doctor.

E had a lot of visitors already that morning. Her daughter, out of respect for my time, ushered me in front of the grandson that was visiting from Las Vegas and interrupted the visit with E's church friend. My visit was brief. I said a few words that I no longer remember and held on to her hand as I tried to keep the tears at bay. I left only minutes later, but with a warm feeling in my heart.

E died several days later. This was not my first patient who had passed, but she was the first one with whom I had such a connection. I had an internal debate with

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myself regarding the appropriateness of going to her funeral. I mentioned it to a few mentors who said it would be nice to go and show the family support. While that seemed like a good reason to attend, it was not why I wanted to be there. I wanted to go for me, so that I could get the closure I so desired.

As I stood in line to pay my condolences, I could see the family whispering to those who did not know me.

There was a moment of relief for me because I was worried that without the medical vestments, most would wonder who the outsider was. I hugged nearly the entire family with tears staining my face. When I left I said a quiet thanks to E, who had taught me so much and given me a glimpse at the incredible love of her family. I may have been her doctor, but she was my friend and teacher.