

Now We Are Five

Category: Stories

written by Paul Gross | April 26, 2013

Paul Gross

"I'm glad that you're the one calling me with this."

John's comment takes me aback. It's an unexpected, almost tender, confession from a twenty-year-old young man whom I've called with some good news and some not-so-good news.

"The good news is that your HIV test is negative," I tell him. "You do not have AIDS. But the not-so-good news is that you tested positive for chlamydia, another sexually transmitted infection."

I want to give him a moment to let this sink in, but he jumps in anxiously: "Can you treat it?"

"Yes, we can treat it. It's easy to treat. It's curable."

"And I'll be okay?"

"Yes, you'll be fine. Once we treat it, the infection will be gone."

I hear the sigh of relief.

We discuss where he might have picked up this infection—not entirely clear—and to whom he might have passed it along, also unclear.

That's when he offers up his comment: "I'm glad that you're the one calling me with this." Not quite a compliment, not quite an intimacy, and yet a little of both.

I've cared for John episodically since his teens. During this week's visit, he discussed his recent, unsuccessful, attempt to support himself with full-time work while attending college in Connecticut. He's now back home, living with his family, regathering himself for another try at higher education.

"I want to work with kids. I want to teach gym. I want to help kids who are struggling with their weight. I've been there myself."

I'd been struck by his athletic frame, his poise, his openness, his ideals.

And now, here we are, just two days later, having a very different conversation.

"So, when something like this happens I always ask people if they've learned something," I say.

He responds with the obligatory promise to always use condoms.

"Do you think you can do that?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. And we both cross our fingers.

A week later, I think back on his comment and wonder: *Did it really matter that I was the one calling him?*

It seemed to matter to John.

And I'm guessing that the quality of our conversation will influence whether he understood the facts, whether he'll pick up the antibiotic pills at the pharmacy and take them, whether he'll call any of the young women who might have infected him or been infected by him, whether he will indeed use condoms, how much guilt and shame he'll feel about this episode and whether he'll feel comfortable bringing his personal concerns to me in a future medical visit.

Pretty important stuff.

Sadly, I can't cite a single study to prove that my making the call mattered at all, even though it mattered just as much to me. Because I happen to believe that the most important thing I do in the office—for the patient's health and for my own well-being—is to make a connection.

It was partly to celebrate and foster the ideals of human connection and honest dialogue that we launched *Pulse—voices from the heart of medicine* in April 2008.

Now, this month, *Pulse* turns five years old.

In these past five years, *Pulse* has, in scores of first-person stories and poems, given voice to many perspectives on health care. In the process, *Pulse* has garnered national press recognition, an international readership, some high-profile praise and two anthologies.

More importantly, by sharing so many personal and universal experiences, *Pulse* affirms that human connection is central to the practice of medicine.

This is one of the truths too often ignored by medicine's scientific literature and by those who make policy and hold the purse strings.

What would happen if more of us focused on this truth, if only for a few minutes every Friday afternoon? Might we change the culture and practice of health care?

My hope, my dream is that we could.

Like any healthy five-year-old, *Pulse* is growing and changing. Sometime over the next few months, we will launch a new website. We'll soon invite you to submit visual images and haiku to appear on that site.

We'll also keep striving to bring *Pulse* to a larger audience. For if our

ultimate goal is to change the culture of health care, it simply won't do to hide our light under a bushel, as a recent *Pulse* author half-jokingly accused us of doing.

As we celebrate *Pulse*'s fifth birthday, not with a lavish bash or the popping of champagne corks, but by preparing another compelling story for next week's issue, I'd like to express particular thanks to a few people whose hard work—at fairy-dust wages—makes *Pulse* possible: our gracious poetry editors, Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer; our indefatigable web developer, Stephen Yorke; our steadfast patron saint, Peter Selwyn; and our peerless executive editor, Diane Guernsey.

And finally, I'd like to offer thanks to you, *Pulse*'s readers, who understand best of all why *Pulse* matters.

About the author:

Paul Gross is *Pulse*'s editor.

Story editor:

Diane Guernsey