

A Summer of Contrasts

Category: Bedside Manner

written by Karen Curran | September 13, 2023

I graduated from high school in June of 1972 and was headed to college in the fall. I was happy and healthy . . . until I wasn't. In the middle of that summer, I was overcome by extreme joint swelling and pain.

My pediatrician referred me to a specialist at Duke Medical Center. When Dr. Smith came into the exam room, he greeted me warmly. He listened attentively to my story—nodding, taking notes, a look of concern on his face.

Although Dr. Smith had been in practice for many years, he treated me as if I were the most important patient he'd ever seen. He gently manipulated my fingers, arms, and legs to gauge my range of motion, stopping when he saw me wince in pain. Through the tears in my eyes, I detected a mist in his.

A lab technician drew several vials of blood and then we waited for test results.

Back in the exam room, Dr. Smith informed me the blood tests indicated I likely had rheumatoid arthritis.

I was dumfounded. Arthritis was an old person's disease.

"Can I even *go* to college?" I asked.

"Yes!" he responded. "You'll take anti-inflammatories to reduce the swelling and you'll have to move slowly and avoid over-exerting yourself, but you can do it. I want to see you again in two weeks, which should be right before you leave, and then I'll see you when you come home—fall break, Christmas break—to monitor the effectiveness of your meds." He spoke with such confidence, it gave me hope.

A week later, I saw my dermatologist for one last visit. She removed some blackheads and treated my acne scars with dry ice, then began to write out a prescription.

"I've just been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis," I said, "and with my doctor at Duke monitoring the drugs he's put me on, I probably shouldn't take anything else."

She put down her pen with an irritated sigh. "Why did you come to see me, then?"

"Umm . . . for you to work on my face, like you just did."

She may not have even heard my reply, as she stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Even I knew that rheumatoid arthritis is more serious than teenage acne. I

certainly knew the compassion and understanding of my doctors varied widely.
You can probably guess which doctor I invited to my wedding five years later.

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