

The Icy-Cold Patient at the Curb

Category: Cold

written by Marilyn Barton | February 23, 2024

One Friday night, a petite African-American woman approached the ER triage desk.

Voice quivering, "You gotta come get my brother."

"What's . . . ?" But she'd walked away. I followed her outside with a wheelchair, and she pointed to a blue VW bug.

My eyes adjusted to the dark as I got closer and observed an emaciated, elderly Black man hunched in the back. Eerily quiet, motionless, and so diaphoretic that moonlight reflected off the sweat pooled near his shoulder.

Questions arose – was it heart failure, stroke, drug overdose, or a bullet in his back? Rather than asking, I leaned into the car. "Hi, I'm Marilyn, ER nurse, you okay?" No response.

All skin and bones, and odd that on a winter night he wore a sleeveless tee shirt and thin pants. After nudging his arm, I jumped back from how icy-cold and slippery his skin was. No person still alive had ever felt that way to me.

Please don't let him be dead.

As I palpated a weak carotid pulse, his sunken eyes suddenly popped up open and stared at me. Then he blinked! A sign of life albeit in a twilight zone. His altered mental state, along with the grayish hue to his dark skin, screamed "cardiogenic shock."

Alone outside with a critically ill patient, I couldn't call for help. Nurses didn't carry radios or phones in the early 1990s. The patient's family helped me maneuver him into the wheelchair, and away I sped.

Once inside the ER, I called out to the volunteer, "Bring me three blankets from the warmer." Another nurse and I placed the semi-conscious man on a stretcher.

"Vital signs yet?" yelled the ER doctor.

"Barely has any." I motioned for him to come over quickly.

My nurse's intuition proved correct. His temperature read "ERR," blood pressure registered fifty systolic, EKG showed heart block at a rate of twenty-five, and respirations were a shallow eight per minute.

Unfortunately, the patient didn't survive resuscitation and died from a massive heart attack.

An hour later, his sister stopped by the triage desk.

“Thank you, dear. He was my oldest brother, been sick too long, wouldn’t go to the doctor. Stopped eating. . . got to where he was numb, couldn’t even feel how cold he was. . .”

As a nurse, sometimes the only comfort I could offer was a couple of warm blankets.

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