

June More Voices: Regrets/No Regrets

Category: Regrets/No Regrets

written by Paul Gross | June 1, 2024

Dear readers,

Edith Piaf, the powerful, diminutive French singer, had a worldwide hit with a song entitled "*Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*," translated as "No Regrets." It was a philosophy that my Belgian mother took to heart, resisting any and all invitations to reexamine past actions in light of actual outcomes and acquired wisdom.

It takes some vulnerability to express regrets. Living with constant regret is a recipe for misery, but expressing regrets can bring us closer to one another, as regrets are a part of life—at least for most of us.

At the same time, it can be comforting to openly and honestly reevaluate past decisions and find that, on the whole, they pass the test of time.

As I near the end of my medical career, one obvious question is whether it was the right choice for me to become a doctor—embarking on medical training at age thirty, after years as a songwriter without a hint of commercial success.

When I began my doctoring journey, I told myself that I could always bail out if it didn't feel right.

Medical school, which took place in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, had more than its share of unhappy moments. And residency was no day at the beach. On my early morning trudge to the hospital, anticipating the daily onslaught of disease, physical pain and decisions I'd be sure to second-guess myself about, I often felt regret as I recalled a previous, simpler life and my low-stress, part-time clerical job in the law firm where I'd worked before medical school.

But I persisted, clinging to the notion of an imaginary future that could somehow be more pleasant.

That future—thirty-three years as an attending family physician and residency program educator—was more pleasant, but "more pleasant" was a low bar. Many of the things that made training difficult were baked into being a doctor—and so my clinical sessions ran over, work and worry intruded into other aspects of life, and I was constantly fending off stress and feelings of inadequacy.

Now, years later, I don't regret saying goodbye to a clerical job that held little meaning for me. I don't regret the rich interactions I've had with many patients. I don't regret the nourishment and sense of purpose my patients have given me. And I don't regret hearing from them the impact that my attention and caring have had on their lives.

I do regret, however, holding myself to an impossible standard—the perfect

doctor who gives patients what they need while keeping to a twenty-minute visit schedule. I regret the anxiety I felt as Monday morning loomed. I regret that the stress of being a doctor was often more than I could comfortably handle.

I also regret one phone call that I wish I could do over—a phone call in which I didn't urge a patient's wife forcefully enough to get him to the emergency room *right away*.

I can't say, "*Non, je ne regrette rien.*" I *do* have regrets. But I don't regret the big picture. I don't regret taking on the challenge of being a doctor. I don't regret doing my imperfect best, even if it sometimes took its toll.

Our June *More Voices* theme is [Regrets/No Regrets](#). Tell us about situations you've faced or decisions you've had to make—as a patient or clinician, family member or caregiver.

Share your story using the [More Voices Submission Form](#). For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#). And have a look at last month's theme: [At the Pharmacy](#).

Remember, your health-related story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you!

With warm regards,

Paul Gross
Editor