

A Life Saved in the Hospital

Category: Hospitalized

written by Neeta Nayak | June 16, 2025

Starting to see hospitalized patients saved my life.

I can't count the number of times I thought about quitting during my preclinical years of medical school. But in India, quitting or switching careers felt like suicide. I hated dissecting dead people, pithing living frogs, peering into microscopes, dropping chemicals into a terrified bunny's eyes. But I wasn't ready to say goodbye to the medical world, so I slogged on, earned good grades, and eventually reached the clinical part of medical school.

The dark night turned into pure sunshine as I began interacting with real humans. I loved listening to the sickest of the sick—not just understanding their physical symptoms, but empathizing with their psychosocial and spiritual angst. Many patients believed illness was a curse from God, a punishment for sins in their childhood or a past life. Mentally ill patients were often chastised. I remember a frightened young woman who was visibly hallucinating being called “hucchi”—crazy. I knew I had myths to dispel and real work to do.

And one early hospitalized patient has stayed with me ever since. AJ was a 7-year-old dying of rheumatic heart disease from an untreated strep throat. He came from a rural town, was the middle of five kids, had been born to a poor farmer. By the time he saw a doctor, his heart failure was end-stage. I was a student doing my pediatrics rotation. All I could do was inject additional diuretics whenever AJ got short of breath.

We'd stabilize and discharge him, but he'd return worse every time. His exhausted mother slept on the cold floor beside his cot, anxious to return to her other children, husband, cows, and crops. I felt misty-eyed every time I injected him. He never cried—just looked at me with a stoic, unblinking smile. He knew he was our guinea pig, yet he trusted me to be gentle. We developed a wordless bond.

One day, I overheard his mother whispering that she wished he would die—to free him from pain and herself from caregiving agony. I stood frozen at the foot of his bed, struck by how little thought I'd given to AJ's emotional world. He knew he was dying. But we didn't talk about it.

At the time, I'd never heard of palliative care. That came later, after a residency in the U.S., where I became board-certified in palliation. I couldn't help little AJ—but that helplessness propelled a sense of purpose.

I owe him much gratitude.

I couldn't save his life, but he saved mine.

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