

Compassionate Anesthesia

Category: Race

written by Roe Astor | October 25, 2016

The anesthesiologist walked in with a virtual reality headset—clearly intent on distancing himself from the scene at hand—and, while ambling around the foot of the operating table, chuckled to the rest of us what a nice he would have of the waves in Hawaii.

We should have let him die,” he said. “It would have saved us time and money.”

Those were words I’d never thought I would hear any caregiver say. Neither in jest nor with candor did I think those words would be said. Not to his wife at home after a long day. Not to his boss, not to his students. Not to *anyone*.

But he said those words while a patient lay on the operating table, unconscious, splayed before him with palms to the heavens, clinging on to the sliver of life that still flowed through his tissues. The anesthesiologist said those words before the surgery to wrench bullets from our patient’s spleen.

The patient was Latino. He had been shot in his car, and he bore tattoos that ran over his left shoulder and spanned the length of his inner calves. It was presumed that he was in a gang because he was Latino and he had tattoos and he had three bullets in him. But that was all we knew.

“We should have let him die,” the anesthesiologist said. “It would have saved us time and money.”

The surgeons grunted as they prepped to make their incisions. The anesthesiologist strolled back to his cave behind the head of the operating table and placed his virtual reality headset over his eyes as the surgery commenced, anesthetizing himself to the world.

Roe Astor

Los Angeles, California