

Of Course I Knew

Category: Pretending

written by Jeffrey Millstein | October 4, 2018

It was midway through a crazy-busy Monday morning in the office: a full schedule plus two urgent walk-ins. I was starting to pray for a no-show to help me get caught up.

Roger was my next patient, a 70-year-old man with hypertension and diabetes, a long-time patient who had not been in for a while. Feeling the pressure of my busy schedule, I decided to skip my usual routine of looking over the recent encounters and studies in the chart before going into Roger's exam room. I knocked, entered and greeted him with a smile, handshake and, "Nice to see you, Roger. I hope you have been feeling well since your last visit." As I moved toward my swivel chair near the computer desk, I noticed that Roger wasn't returning a smile. "Well, I'm sure you heard Madge died last month," he said in a monotone. I cringed inside as the next words came out of my mouth. "Oh yes, I'm sorry for your loss," I said, adjusting my tone and posture to show sympathy.

In fact, I had no idea that his wife had died, but pretended that I innocently neglected to acknowledge it. If Roger was onto me, he did not show it, and went on to tell me about Madge's final weeks, while I listened and adjusted my expectations for the visit.

I felt ashamed, and still do, when I think about that day. What would have happened if I had just said, "Roger, I'm sorry but in my haste I did not look over your chart before coming in to see you. I did not know about Madge." I wonder if he would have respected me more for my honesty, rather than my lame attempt to present an image of the thorough doctor who doesn't miss a trick. I think transparency would have built stronger trust and connection with Roger. I missed an opportunity.

I try not to let time pressure lure me into skipping essential visit preparation anymore. And now, when I do overlook something, I admit it.

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