

Ward Wanderer

Category: Holding On

written by Ashiq Pramchand | April 21, 2020

As usual, I found myself rushing through the labyrinth of hallways at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Hospital, in search of our next tutorial. Every day, as fourth-year medical students, we are expected to present cases to awaiting consultants, in the many wards. This time I was lost. A kind nurse directed me to the place where I was meant to be...the pediatric oncology unit.

The word "cancer" can strike fear in the heart of anyone, and this was my first time to visit an oncology ward. This was a pediatric oncology unit, and the walls leading to the unit were covered with vivid images of animated sea creatures. Most prominent among them were friendly-looking crabs. The message was not lost on me: crabs are the creature from which the term "Cancer" is derived.

The convoluted hospital halls and endless medical treatment algorithms can sometimes leave patients and doctors feeling lost, drifting endlessly on a sea of chemotherapy drugs and IV fluids, without a sign of complete recovery. I feel that it is our duty as physicians to help guide our patients back from the brink, while they soldier through chemotherapy as if caught in the relentless storm that steered the homebound Odysseus off course.

I decided to clerk a patient as soon as possible before our next tutorial. I found a young boy playing with his toy soldiers. He was missing an eye. His history suggested a previous optic glioma, a slow-growing tumor that causes gradual loss of vision. He smiled eagerly at me.

One of the interesting things I learned in medical school is that cancer rarely affects the heart. Cardiovascular cells become highly specialized before birth; thus they are less likely to mutate. But what I found even more amazing during my month on the pediatric oncology unit was that the metaphorical hearts of these children were not affected by their cancer. I saw this in the way they played and the way they smiled.

I also saw their resiliency in the ways they dreamed. The "Make-A-Dream" foundation worked actively with the patients there, and the hospital staff displayed images and reminders of the gifts throughout the ward. I realized that these patients, much like some cancers, are constantly changing, yet, their dreams remain resolute. They may be sailing an uncharted sea, but I do not believe that they are lost.

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