

Perspective

Category: Cancer

written by Katryna Peacock | November 8, 2021

I have a patient who is very close to my heart. She started seeing me when I was first able to have patients on my panel as an intern. She hadn't seen a doctor in quite a few years and was working hard to get her health straightened out. She was in a healthy relationship with her significant other; had four children with whom she had an excellent relationship; and had an overall positive outlook on life.

We started getting her up to date on screenings and lab work. There was an abnormality in her mammogram. Fast forward to roughly a year later, after many tests and biopsies: It turned out she had invasive ductal carcinoma. I saw her to touch base before she had a skin-sparing mastectomy with reconstruction. The main point of the visit was to make sure she was as okay as possible prior to her surgery.

She confided in me that she was very concerned about one of her children. He was 16 and had become more withdrawn and hadn't been sharing much with her or the rest of the family. My patient felt she'd come to terms with her surgery, and her anxiety was now focused on her child.

We spoke about how everyone copes with family stress in different ways. We spoke about how important mother-child relationships can be, especially during a major health challenge.

I feel very protective of her, since I watched and supported my own mom through her diagnosis and battle with ovarian cancer. I know how important my relationship with my mom was and how awful it feels to have lost her. I feel selfish about my desire to reach out to this patient and make sure she's okay. I know it's important to have strong relationships with patients, but I also know my personal experience colors my interactions with this patient.

Grief is a funny thing. It's been over eighteen months since my mom passed. Some days, I feel I've learned to cope; other days, my feelings are raw and fresh. I find I become attached to patients who remind me of my mom, in spirit or mannerisms. It has also been cathartic, albeit somewhat self-serving, for me to hear this particular patient tell me she didn't think she'd have made it to this point without my support. The reality is that she's much stronger than she thinks she is; I was just in the wings to support her when she needed it.

These interactions remind me of how proud my mom was when I graduated from medical school. They remind me how often she told me she was sure I had an excellent bedside manner, even though she never saw me interact with a patient.

I didn't want to hear it at the time, but I think one of my mother's doctors was right in telling me that the experience would make me a better doctor. At

least I hope it has.

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