

Precious Minutes

Category: Watching the Clock

written by Ellen Zhang | September 11, 2022

He has sharp right abdominal pain.

The pain comes and goes. It started as dull and general, but he feels it's now concentrated on his right side. He had a similar pain a year ago, he adds. It's worse now, so he came to the hospital.

He has a cough due to COVID.

The cough has been going on for a couple months. He had COVID in November, and it resolved. But he got COVID again in February and since then has had this lingering cough. He's vaccinated and boosted.

He has a history of skin cancer.

His skin cancer was treated, but he's now worried about a darkening of the skin on his shins. He feels sure it's darker, but it's hard to differentiate shades of brown. He asks us to take a careful look.

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I spent more than an hour with this patient in the emergency department, asking him questions and piecing together why he was there. The room was too small for me, the patient, and his wife—not to mention the iPad-enabled translator who helped us converse.

I emerged from the room struck by how much time I had spent with him. But by then I was able to better understand his story, which was previously buried in the notes of other providers. In that moment, I truly realized what the more senior members of my team meant when they said that, as a medical student, I would be able to spend more time with patients. I also truly understood how challenging it can be for a patient whose first language isn't English to seek care, even if a translator is readily available. So much time is required to repeat questions, words, phrases; so much can still be lost in translation.

At the end of my patient's hospital stay, he clasped my hand warmly, offering his thanks for the time I had spent with him. In turn, I remain grateful that he showed me how building a patient-physician relationship takes trust and time. Minutes are precious.

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