

Emergency Landing

Category: Stories

written by Shumon Dhar | October 5, 2012

Shumon Dhar

In the summer of my first year of college, I did an internship as a nursing attendant in a rehab hospital's stroke unit.

As a premed student, I had little idea of what it meant to be a physician. But that didn't stop me from feeling slightly superior to others who weren't on the same path. Although I didn't know how to take someone's blood pressure, I often treated friends to detailed descriptions of the biochemistry of complex metabolic diseases.

My summer job took me totally out of this academic comfort zone.

I found myself washing, dressing and caring for the most debilitated people imaginable—unable to walk and suffering from cognitive impairment and, often, incontinence. Throughout the day, the halls echoed with their moans of pain.

Every morning, it was my job to wash, dress and transport several of them to the dining room before breakfast. The work didn't come naturally to me. Long-haired, underweight and completely unused to manual labor, I was quickly labeled a burden by the nurses.

To counteract this humiliating reality, I tried every minute to project an air of knowing exactly what I was doing. And somewhere inside, I still harbored a sense of superiority—not to the doctors or medical staff, but to the patients.

Despite the strain of my job, I enjoyed being with the patients. As the youngest and newest staff member, I sensed that they found my presence invigorating. And I liked talking with them.

Telling me their stories, they would share unsuspected sides of themselves. At night, one proud working-class man often broke down and cried with frustration over his debilitated condition, complaining that the neurologists didn't listen or take him seriously. When I mentioned this to them, they said that such outbursts were a symptom of his stroke—but to me, that seemed like an easy way out of dealing with the patient's emotional pain. This man, once so self-reliant, now felt scared and confused, and I felt glad to help him feel less lonely for a few hours.

Two months into my job, just when I was starting feel more competent and confident, a new patient arrived: Mr. Woyzeck. A large, wise, cheerful, foul-mouthed ex-mechanic, he had multiple sclerosis and had recently suffered a massive stroke.

I liked him right away for his positive, upbeat energy and never-ending banter.

“Hey, Sean!” he’d call. “See if you can get the nurses to start giving us guys Viagra!”

Between jokes, he’d pepper me with practical advice—everything from how to change a flat tire to his proven methods for picking up women. It was a relief to spend time with him—to let down my guard, have some laughs and relax for a few moments.

Mr. Woyzeck needed help with the most basic self-care, but even when doing the lowliest tasks for him, I didn’t feel small. I didn’t mind taking him to the bathroom—rather, I felt proud and grateful that he trusted me enough to let me help him.

“You’re too young to look so serious all the time. And get a haircut—one of these days I might mistake you for a nurse and make a pass at you!” he’d say, his rusty laugh like a dying steam engine.

One morning, I was getting Mr. Woyzeck ready for breakfast. I’d washed him, changed his clothes and emptied the urine from his Foley catheter bag; now it was time to transfer him from the bed to the wheelchair.

In the past, I’d asked others to help me with this task. This time, I felt, I was ready to do it on my own.

Positioning the wheelchair, I lowered the bed’s safety guard and had Mr. Woyzeck sit up, his legs planted firmly and perpendicular on the floor before the chair. My next step was to grab him by his waist and, with his help, shift him quickly into the chair.

I put my arms around his waist and lifted his soft, 200-pound body.

Halfway between the bed and the chair, Mr. Woyzeck’s knees buckled. He started to slip down through my arms.

Feeling panicky, I gripped his bulky frame tighter, trying to hold it up.

“Sean, I think you should lower me to the floor,” he said calmly.

As he continued to slide slowly downwards, I had no choice but to comply. Gingerly, I lowered him the rest of the way down. Then I rang the bell for help.

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In seconds, the room filled with doctors, nurses and other staff. As the

physical therapist and nurses lifted Mr. Woyzeck into his wheelchair, the doctors checked *my* back to see whether I'd wrenched anything.

As soon as Mr. Woyzeck was off the floor, he started talking.

"If Sean hadn't been here helping me, I would have been in much worse shape. Sean did an excellent job of lowering me to the floor. If it had been anyone else, I don't know what would have happened. If I could write, I'd write a letter of recommendation for him."

He could have yelled at me, called me incompetent, demanded a different attendant. Instead, clearly thinking I was in for a reprimand, he was doing his utmost to get me off the hook.

I just stood there, face flushed and heart racing, feeling humiliated. Just when I'd thought I was getting the hang of things, here I was back at square one..

But no one reprimanded me. Later, in fact, a doctor told me, "This happens to everyone who works in the stroke ward. Don't worry about it."

I realized that it wasn't my confidence but my humility—my willingness to listen, not to lecture—that had led Mr. Woyzeck to befriend me.

In the following days, I felt a change: My feelings of superiority over my patients had disappeared and were replaced by a sense of kinship with them.

Shortly afterwards, my internship ended, and I headed back to college.

For months after, I turned the incident over in my mind; and even now, in my final year of medical school, I often think about Mr. Woyzeck.

My fellow medical students and I are often taken to task by our professors; in a sense, we learn humility on a daily basis.

But to relinquish my feelings of superiority in exchange for a real, much deeper connection with my patients is a very special lesson—one that I still thank Mr. Woyzeck for teaching me.

About the author:

Shumon Dhar is currently a fourth-year medical student at Stony Brook University School of Medicine; his goal is to become a head-and-neck surgeon. He is also pursuing the seven-year combined BS/MD program at the Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education. "It was there that my professor Dr. Donald Kollisch, a *Pulse* contributor himself, encouraged me to use writing to reflect upon my experiences as a student of medicine. This has helped me grow as both a future physician and as a human being."

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