

This poem is a reflection on my experiences of both working with the team and interacting with my patients. As a medical student, so much of pre-rounding and getting my presentation ready for rounds felt like a rush. Writing down all the vitals, labs, imaging results and thinking of an assessment and plan for each patient I was responsible for felt more an exercise to show my team that I am capable than a real patient connection. Many of my mornings were spent running from one room to the next, asking the patient how they were doing but keeping an eye on the clock. And finally returning to rounds, anxious about my presentation and hoping I came across as competent.

Of course, working with the team was always amazing, they were always willing to teach and impart knowledge. But I really struggled with the concept that my interactions with patients were cases and that I spent more time writing notes than speaking with them. I decided in the afternoons, I would visit my patients and spend some time to hear about their lives. This was my favorite part of each day. Hearing VA patients speak about their time in the service, about their families and loved ones and seeing them laugh despite their illness made me feel I knew them as people, not as presentations of disease. I reflected a lot on the word “patient” not only in its referral to a person being treated but also in “patience” and the importance of tolerance in a patient’s confrontation with mortality. I thought about what it would feel like if I were hospitalized and how I would want to be treated.

I specifically remember one patient I had with a terminal diagnosis of lung cancer who decided to go hospice care. He told me a funny story about how he had a lazy dog when he was stationed in Alaska serving in the 1950’s that would never run until one day when he saw a bear. The bear ran after the dog and a cat and the dog jumped on a cat that was running away, using it as a ride. It was such a ridiculous story and we both laughed a ton. I felt in that moment our laughter, a serendipitous experience between one person nearly at the conclusion of their story and one person hoping to get enough sleep and keep afloat in medical school, was mutually therapeutic. In that moment, I felt both of us were patients and a dose of connection made us feel better. I remember when he was discharged, he told me “I’m really glad to have gotten to meet you. I’ll look for you next time I’m here.” It is these connections that make waking up early, learning and working hard everyday worth it.