



*This is a resident case log of a patient encounter in which
an “Aware Medicine topic” was central.*

Compassion for Yourself Dear Doctor

Today is the last day of my intern year. Reflecting back on the time that has passed I often feel as though this experience has been such a blur to me. Never in my life have I met so many people, worked so hard, and learned so much in a short amount of time. Despite the pace, however, I recognize that many of my interactions with patients have had a tremendous impact on who I am becoming as a person and as a physician. I see the opportunity to be so close to human suffering as a gift. I welcome the powerful experiences I have with patients as both initiation into the profession and also as a practice which deepens my understanding of the human condition.

As an intern there are situations I expected I would be present for—namely serious illness, medical decisions, death and the mystery. Although all of these made an appearance over the past year, my mind seems more surprised by the times I was irritable, judgmental and not a good listener. One experience in particular, which was nothing but a blip in time for everyone else involved, has stayed close to me now. It was month 7 of my intern year and I was working in the ER at UW Hospital. Feedback from most of my attendings focused on the fact that I was thoughtful and thorough but slow. My clinic schedule had increased the number of patients I had been seeing and I was working among other things, on efficiency. This was especially true during the time I spent in the ER.

I was sent in to see a 55 year old woman with persistent and heavy vaginal bleeding. I had taken an interview and started the necessary evaluation and work-up of her symptoms. As was frequently happening now when I saw patients in the ER, my mind would wander during the history and physical to the other patients I needed to see, the other tests and labs to follow-up on. This felt like a way I could spend time with patients while developing my skills for multi-tasking. During my interview with this woman she kept mentioning that her mother had just died from ovarian cancer and she was worried about her symptoms. I reassured her that this was not likely to be causing her symptoms and we would arrange for whatever tests and follow-up necessary to diagnose what was happening. After obtaining a history and talking briefly with this patient I competently performed a pelvic exam and identified what appeared to be the source of her bleeding which happened to be a cervical polyp. I politely explained that I would be consulting the gynecology service and then excused myself from the room so that I could go on to the next patient. As I was leaving and my hand was on the door I noticed from the corner of my eye that she started crying. There was a moment when I knew that I could either stay and provide more reassurance or leave and continue on with my efficient care as a resident in the ER. I looked the ER tech in the eye and then turned away, quietly shutting the door and leaving her to console this patient. As I left the room, I said to myself this is not your job right now. When I staffed that visit my attending thanked me for seeing the patient and recommended that I order the patient some valium for her anxiety. This is what I did and then I moved on to the next patient, the next patient and the next patient...

Although the outcome for this patient was ultimately favorable and I fulfilled my role in the medical system, I felt like I had distinctly acted in a way that came into conflict with the deeper qualities of my personhood. In that moment I might have been doing my job but I didn't feel good and that is what has stayed with me. Reflecting back to the beginning of this year I thought surely I would flourish. I saw residency as a training ground for my soul and through my interactions with patients I expected to watch my heart open further to empathy and compassion for other people. Since then I have often seen how kindness and compassion are challenged by fatigue, work, irritability, and emotion. I wonder who I



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am becoming as I progress through residency. When I reflect on these experiences find the practice of compassion for myself in this system to be very important.