



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

Dialysis Dilemma

I recently experienced a situation in which a Hmong patient refused dialysis for his very severe chronic kidney disease. What was interesting in this case is that he was very young to be needing dialysis (early 40s) and that he had made this decision in direct conflict with the other members of his family. He was admitted to the hospital for a week for this and other very serious problems. It did not matter that everyone around him was telling him that he should do this, he simply would not and he offered no rationale. He eventually discharged AMA and was told he would probably die soon.

He returned to St. Mary’s two weeks later, still alive and still in need of dialysis. This time, however, he had decided that dialysis would be OK, and he was set up for this. Again, he offered no particular reasoning as to why he now all of a sudden agreed to this.

He was challenging to patient care staff and his family because everyone around him felt that he was making the wrong decision even though he was very intelligent and capable of understanding the consequences of his choice. It was difficult to know what beliefs he held that had been holding him back. Presumably they were not inherent to his culture as the rest of his family was also exasperated by him.

My personal beliefs also led me to try to convince him that he needed this treatment. Luckily, by the time we met he had already decided that he would have dialysis. Nevertheless, I went into the room with the mindset of breaking through to him where others couldn’t, and getting him to realize that he needed to make a certain decision. This was not a great attitude to have, but thankfully it did not interfere with patient care.

If I had been in the position to have convinced him to undergo dialysis, I would have needed to go into his room with a much more open mind that was willing to hear his reasoning. Even so, it appeared that when he didn’t want it, he was unpersuadable.

I felt frustrated at the concept of someone who would willingly defer a lifesaving and necessary treatment and risk death. I wish that I could have set aside those paternalistic feelings and tried to understand why he was making the decision he was. In the future I hope to be able remain more neutral and understanding rather than placing my own beliefs and priorities into the place of others.