



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

It's Ok to Die

It was the typical story of the medical intensive care unit. First, the annoying cell phone ring of the charge nurse went off. Then, "Hey you, we have an admission." Well, the "hey you" part isn't true, but to keep this confidential it will have to suffice. A new patient was being admitted to the MICU in respiratory failure. He was intubated in the ER and coming to us in that condition.

The patient was in his 60's, but might as well have been 90. This man was incredibly unfortunate and had the past medical history of 10 men. He had a primary lung cancer with multi-system metastasis, a history of 3 vessel coronary artery bypass grafting, renal failure, and frequent hospitalizations due to all of the above.

It was obvious to the nurses and I that this patient would not survive the night. He was demonstrating agonal breathing over the mechanical ventilator, was unresponsive, and had a very low blood pressure. He had "the look" of actively dying. His wife and son were at the hospital as well, and soon they arrived at the unit. The attending physician and I discussed the case with his wife. I wanted to be sure she knew we could place comfort care orders on her husband. She had a very strange affect. She seemed unaffected by the situation. She wasn't quite sure what to do, but eventually decided to keep him intubate through the night and pull the tube in the morning. I knew deep down that he would not survive until then. I wanted to respect her wishes, though, and so we kept the patient intubated and did what we could without being overly aggressive in this futile situation.

The staff and I were all on the same page. We felt he should be comfort care only. To us, this patient was unnecessarily uncomfortable. Thankfully he was no code, except for intubation. He was obviously dying in front of us, and we felt horrible that the tube was down his throat. This went on for a couple hours when I decided to act. I was in the room with the nurse and our patient. His wife and son had left earlier. I told the nurse I needed to talk to the patient. So I approached this dying man and held his hand. I told him his family loved him and that it was ok to die. Literally 5 seconds after telling him that, his heart went into ventricular fibrillation and quickly into asystole. He passed away within 10 minutes of holding his hand and giving him permission to die.

What a powerful experience. I am still amazed when I think of it. I absolutely believe we did the right thing. Even if people are unconscious or semi-conscious, their souls are still with us. It was an amazing experience I will always remember.