



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

Was It A Good Death?

A while back, a patient was on my schedule to “establish care.” She was 50 but looked more like 70 and just a tiny physical presence—you might say cachectic. She had been feeling more and more short of breath and, though she hadn’t been to a doctor in over 20 years, she felt bad enough to take herself to the emergency room. A chest radiograph showed some concerning lesions; a chest CT showed she was full of cancer. It turned out to be primary lung cancer.

Her oncologists wanted her to have a primary care physician, so there she was. She didn’t know what she was supposed to get from me and I didn’t know what the specialists were expecting. I took a general history—events that led to her going to the ER, past medical history, social history, family history, etc. She told me that she was going to undergo chemotherapy and that her oncologists thought their medicines might be able to help. In the back of my mind, I knew that I had to do at least one of my “home visits” with an older person to satisfy my residency requirements—a sense of guilt over being glad she walked in my door so I could check that one off the list. In the front of my mind, I saw a woman who could help me learn more about going through chemotherapy and what I could do to help her get through it. I was excited and she seemed fairly open to what I might offer—nutrition, spiritual tools, advocacy....

I offered a home visit and she sounded interested. On the way out, she mentioned she had a sister who got through breast cancer so she was sure she could make it through this. She didn’t feel her kids would be able to offer much support, however, because she was the strong one in the family. Her essence left a unique impression.

During my lunch hour that day, I looked up a few articles on integrative approaches to dealing with cancer. In my mind I thought I might call on a colleague who specialized in this area. I was motivated and excited to learn about this. And then, residency got me again. In the next few weeks I had a lot of calls, a week of mole and got behind in my Epic Inbox. Again. I kept an office note from her oncologist in my Inbox as a way to remind me to give her a call and arrange a home visit—just as soon as I got a chance to read the articles I had found and maybe research a little bit about her pathology and treatment. Just as soon as I got a chance to do that.

A few weeks ago, I saw that oncology office note that I had in my Inbox and thought I’d review her chart to see how she was doing. When I opened it, I got a warning that I was about to open the chart of a deceased patient. She was dead. Nothing in the chart said how or when or where. Did she die at home? Did they get hospice involved? How did her children handle it? Was the chemotherapy worth it? Did she choose to stop it? Did she have many or any good days since I saw her?

I was angry with myself for putting her off so long. What if there was something I could have added to the end of her life? What if she could have used an advocate to help optimize the days she had left? Did she remember that I had offered a home visit? Was she waiting for a call or wishing I would? I felt like a damn vulture—*this one* could satisfy my home visit; *this one* could teach me about getting through chemotherapy. *This one* is a woman, a *human being*, that knew she was facing a road of tremendous physical, emotional and spiritual suffering—did I even take the time to see her for that? What if she felt like all physicians were asses, either making false promises of home visits or of what their magic toxins could do to “cure” her? Why the hell didn’t I call her sooner?



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Then I was angry with this process we call residency. Why are so many demands placed on us that we don't have time to be the physicians we're training to be? Why can't I have a little damn space to breathe and wrap my mind around my greatest educators about medicine and humanity--my patients? Why is it that it puts me in a million situations where I don't feel like I know what I am doing and give me just enough balls to juggle that I never really get a chance to figure it out?

I am not so egotistical that I think I could have completely changed everything for this woman, but I am only disappointed that I missed an opportunity for a real connection with another human being. I know she may never have given our visit a second thought. She may have had a fine death with loved ones at her side and as comfortable as possible. She may have even preferred I stay out of her business. Who was I to her? The problem is, I will never know. I offered her something that I did not follow through on. I felt like a damn fraud.

I am angry with that fact that I have no control over my time--I don't know when I would have called her. I wake up early and go to bed late, working as much as I can stand, trying to spend some time each day with my young family. I work nights, weekends, holidays. This business sets me up to be in a position of such great potential healing or at least compassion and advocacy, but the process of training seems to rarely allow the time to make it all happen—it feels like a big tease sometimes. Is that an excuse? Is it selfish? I'm still alive to enjoy my family. I should work harder.

Was it a good death? Was she alone? Was she comfortable? Did she ever accept her illness? Was she at peace when she died? How is her family?

Could I have offered her any slight bit of comfort? Could we have breathed together? Could she and I have met in some breath outside of our cancers, outside of these pathologies that consume us? Was it a good death?