



Disarming Dialogues in Ethics and Professionalism

Looking Deeper

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It was sometime in the last summer and I remember the heat; the smell of sweat, of socks and the peculiar smell of bleaching powder defined the wards. That morning, nothing in particular disturbed the perpetual hum in the Female Surgical Ward, except perhaps the reluctant movement of the blades of ceiling fans.

We were surrounding bed number 3, Unit 1. This lady, 65 years old, came with severe pain in the abdomen. Another aged lady, the patient's sister, was answering our questions, as this lady kept mum all along. She didn't look at any of us, not even her attendant.

After the history and examination was over and my colleagues were starting to leave, I tried to palpate her abdomen while concentrating hard to read any signs of tenderness in that stern face (I am sometimes a lazy student, doing things at the last moment; not proud of that, though!). She was a widow, evident from the lack of 'xendur'; the eyes, with

setting in arcus senilis, were fixed on something far away. I tried to follow her gaze, only in vain as there was nothing there.

Suddenly, she grabbed my arm and looked at me, deep into my eyes; I couldn't look away.

"Xi aahibo, xi aahibo!" (He will come, he will surely return!). And then her eyes gave way to tears streaming down her cheeks and I did not know what to do! I looked at the sister.

I learnt that some months ago, the lady lost her younger son to a road traffic accident. He was a 'local' autorickshaw (what we call 'Magic') driver who breathed his last on the way to our hospital. She had another son who lived separately with his family and hadn't come to visit the mother even once!

I wiped her tears with my fingers. She hugged her sister and cried. She had no

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one, except the sister. The sister had to roam about alone in the huge hospital to attend to all the formalities.

It was already past 12 and I was very late for my theory class. I tried to console the lady that everything would be alright, but I did not know what to say!

To say that her living son will come and take care of her? Or that her dead son will return to her? I could not give her false hope. I could not say anything!

I promised to be back later, and went on my way to class.

I could not think of anything else in the whole class, during lunch, and in the post-lunch classes. I could not understand which son the lady kept referring to, when she said 'he will come'. The dead one? Or the living one who had not bothered to see her face for the past 5 years?

Why wouldn't the son look after such an adorable mother? What would she do once she got back home? Who would look after her? Would she be alright?

When I went to see her in the evening, she recognised me from far away. A smile touched her lips and her eyes shimmered! We talked, I looked at the reports and said she would be fine in a week (though I did not know a thing about her course of treatment)

Maybe we had exams or holidays - I don't remember why, but I didn't go to meet her for the next few days. When I finally went, she was nowhere to be seen; instead, there was a fat woman in bed number 3.

She had been discharged, or maybe referred somewhere else. I did not follow up. Maybe I failed - as a human, as a medical student, to ease her difficulties, to tend to her pain (I don't mean medically or surgically). May be there was something I could have done for her. Find her an old age home? Contact her son? Fetch her reports? At least talk to her more. But I did not.

Maybe next time, I thought. I just hoped that she was alright, and happy. Her smile went through my mind, and I smiled too.

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It is accompanied by a commentary written by Dr SK Pandya, MCh. The commentary can be accessed at <http://www.rhime.in/ojs>