



Failure is a great teacher

Rakeshkumar Luhana, MS, DNB (Neurosurgery), Fellowship in Spine Surgery (Toronto),
Fellowship in Advanced Neurosurgery (Japan)

Consultant Neurosurgeon and Spine Specialist, Minimally Invasive Spine Surgeon, Venus
Superspecialty Hospital, Vadodara, Gujarat

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Rakeshkumar Luhana
Venus Superspecialty Hospital,
Old Padra Road, Vadodara,
Gujarat – 390020
Email: rcluhana at hotmail dot com

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*Life is short,
art long,
opportunity fleeting,
experimentation perilous,
and judgement difficult.*

- Hippocrates

Hippocrates, the father of medicine, aptly said, “Ars longa, vita brevis”, meaning ‘the art of medicine is long, while life is short.’ The art of neurosurgery has been a long learning curve for me. The onerous task of learning to manage complications has been an even bigger challenge.

I have been practicing neurosurgery for the past fifteen years. I specialize in key-hole spinal surgery and have earned some repute in this field. However, even today, a post-surgical complication gives me the same gut-wrenching feeling I used to get during my initial years.

Some time ago, a 40-year old man came to my clinic with severe neck pain which was radiating to his right arm. He had been unable to lift any heavy weight for the past fifteen days. An MRI revealed a prolapsed inter-vertebral disc at the level of C4-5. Since

conservative management in the form of rest, medications, and physiotherapy had been tried, I advised him to undergo key-hole spine surgery. As was incumbent upon me, I explained the pros and cons of the procedure to the patient and to his wife. They consented for the surgery.

Later that week, I began the operation on the patient. My experience has taught me to conduct each surgery with meticulous attention to detail, and this surgery was to be no different. I approached the spine through a microscope. Unfortunately, engorged epidural veins began bleeding profusely making me work in overdrive. I controlled the bleeding with some effort. Finally, I reached the disc. To my utter surprise, it was a ‘hard’ disc, contrary to the soft disc I had expected on the basis of the MRI. I removed the disc and decompressed the nerve. My job was done. However, I kept my fingers crossed about the outcome hoping that his spinal cord had not suffered any damage.

When the patient recovered from the surgery, my worst ‘nightmare’ became a reality. He couldn’t move his right arm and right leg!

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Oh my God, I exclaimed to myself. My professor in Toronto had warned us, “The law of averages catches up with every one of us.” This case seemed to fulfil his wise prophecy. As the famous endocrine cancer surgeon and best-selling author from Harvard University, Atul Gawande, puts it, “No matter what measures are taken, doctors will sometimes falter, and it isn't reasonable to ask that we achieve perfection. What is reasonable is to ask that we never cease to aim for it.”[1]

Despite all modern technology and expertise, medicine's ground is 'uncertainty' - and wisdom both for the patient and doctor is defined by how one copes with it. Dealing with my emotions was hard enough; breaking this 'bad news' to the patient's kith and kin was an even more challenging task for me. I cautiously explained the complication to the patient's wife. During the ensuing days, I stood by their side and offered further guidance and support. The queries of the patient's relatives were repetitive at times; however, I tried to handle them with poise and patience. The least I could do in such a situation was be courteous. I took utmost care to ease the additional financial burden on the patient.

I was visibly upset, and my family members could sense it. Somebody has famously said, “Success is a bad teacher.” Vice versa,

failure compels you to travel the untrodden path. I watched some surgical videos, discussed the issue with my colleagues, and tried to figure out what I could learn from by this complication. Such reflective practice would prepare me for the future, but, for this particular patient, destiny - through my hands - had dealt a cruel blow.

A cerebellopontine angle surgery was scheduled soon thereafter. I realised that I could not abdicate. I would continue to use my skills for the larger good. I shrugged the failure aside and with a smile prepared myself for the challenge.

It helps to consider myself an 'instrument' of the Almighty. If the patient does well, the credit goes to Him as well. If the patient does not do as well, I will trust Him to step in – as, indeed, He did in this case. Over the course of the next several days, my patient's right leg regained normal functioning. I discharged the patient with some advice for future recovery.

I continue to approach each surgery meticulously. Further, I try and practice calmness, for as James Allen suggests, “Calmness is one of the beautiful jewels of wisdom.” Devastating though they may be for all concerned, complications are a part and parcel of a surgeon's job. It is a devious design by God to keep us grounded!

Reference

1. Gawande A. Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science. New York: Picador; Reprint edition. April 2003; pp 288.

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