A Conversation with Memory

Satyajeet Roy, MD, FACP^{1,2}

¹Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Camden, NJ, USA; ²Department of Medicine, Cooper University Hospital, Cherry Hill, NJ, USA.

J Gen Intern Med 26(9):1080–1

DOI: 10.1007/s11606-010-1630-4

© Society of General Internal Medicine 2011

It was her initial visit—an assessment for possible dementia. I greeted 62-year-old Mrs. Farhi and her adult daughter, Noor. Noor communicated fluently in English, but Mrs. Farhi spoke only Farsi. I suggested that they reschedule their visit so that I could arrange a Farsi-English interpreter.

Noor appeared disappointed and explained, “It was so hard to arrange my day off, and request a friend to babysit my children. It was even harder to motivate my mother to come and see you.”

“I understand your situation,” I replied, “but our clinical encounter may be limited without a proper interpreter service. It may have a negative impact on the assessment.”

Mrs. Farhi could not fully understand our conversation, but I could witness subtle disappointment in her facial movements. I decided to proceed with the encounter, requesting that Noor assist with Farsi to English translation, to which she agreed happily.

Noor reported that Mrs. Farhi had been forgetting little things for the last few months. A couple of times she had forgotten to put the milk back into the refrigerator and had forgotten her spectacles in the bathroom while they searched the entire apartment. Last week, she had tried to unlock the door of their next-door neighbor's apartment after picking up her grandson from the school bus. Noor was extremely worried that her mother might be developing dementia.

Mrs. Farhi had been in good health. She had lost her husband when Noor was eight. She had emigrated from Afghanistan to the United States about 5 years prior to our visit. She played a pivotal role in smoothly managing the family chores. She used to sell dry fruits in a shop in Afghanistan—a shop that had seen more silence than customers in recent years.

After completion of the history and physical examination, I asked Mrs. Farhi to draw a clock. She smiled at me and chuckled with Noor, saying that she had never been able to draw anything. I explained the Folstein Mini-Mental State Examination and started the questionnaire.

To my surprise, she could not score even a single point from my orientation questions—year, season, date, day, or month. I reassured her and repeated the question. She maintained her silence. When Noor told me that her mother did not understand the English calendar, I proceeded cautiously to the next

set of questions—location and object naming—where she happily scored full points. Noor was doing a wonderful job of word-to-word translation. Out of the corner of my eyes, I witnessed a wave of assuagement pass over their faces.

Yet moving further on to serial sevens and spelling ‘world’ backwards, we again encountered a roadblock. Mrs. Farhi expressed that she had hardly felt the need to learn calculations during her usual trades of dry fruits, because the majority of her customers were honest and paid accurately. I then asked her to recall the three objects I had named earlier; she could remember only two of them.

I showed her two objects and asked her to name them. Identifying the first object, she said “*Kalam*.”

I responded before Noor’s interpretation: “Yes, it is a pen.”

She looked at me with pleasant surprise. Identifying the second item she said “*Kitaab*.”

I responded again: “Good. It is a book.”

She looked at Noor and whispered in Farsi “*Wallah, Farsi mefahima*” (“Oh God, he understands Farsi”).

I shared with them that growing up in the northern part of India, I had been exposed to remnants of diverse cultures and ethnicities. For instance, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, and various other languages were nicely blended in the north Indian and Hindi literature. Mrs. Farhi became very excited. She inquired whether I had had a chance to visit the famous Buddha statue in the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan. I expressed my wish to experience the breathtaking view of the valley from the top of the statue one day.

Nostalgic conversations enhanced her confidence, and she quickly scored three more points on the three-stage command. Further on, though, she could not repeat “No ifs, ands, or buts.” Noor attempted to translate the sentence, but I resisted, concerned about the validity of a Farsi interpretation.

Although the questions were simple, a cloud of perturbation covered Mrs. Farhi’s face. She turned towards Noor and, in Farsi, said with annoyance, “I don’t think I have lost my mind. How could these questions test the great memories of my childhood in the valley? Ask me how fast I ran to hug my father when he used to return home after a long day at work, hiding both of his hands on his back, full of sweets for me. And those long conversations I used to have with my friends during spring, playing and swinging in our backyard.”

There was a long pause. The silence in the examination room was deafening, and palpable. I stood up, held her hands, and attempted to explain that the test was a valid tool to identify decline in memory and cognition, and that individual scores do help to establish an accurate diagnosis, plan, and prognosis. She looked at my hands, and then my face. I watched as her cheeks turned crimson and wet. Soon, a teardrop made its way to the very tip of her nose. She graciously allowed me to proceed.

Noor's written Farsi translation of 'Close your eyes' worked quite well, but she hesitated while trying to copy my design, and again murmured that her friends always made fun of her poor drawings. I then requested that she write a sentence, expressing anything. She looked at the paper, turned her face towards us, and became serious. Suddenly, a flood of scripture in Farsi started flowing from the right to the left side of the paper. Noor wrote the English translation on the lower half.

Mrs. Farhi had scored 17 out of a possible 30 points. Noor cautiously measured my facial expressions as her mother inched scarily close to a diagnosis of moderate dementia. Meanwhile, I scrutinized some of the questions that might have biased her assessment because of inflexibility on the basis of language, education, and ethnicity. In the absence of an adaptable format, how could I be sure of her true score?

I looked carefully at the categories in which she scored poorly. I asked how Mrs. Farhi followed date and time. Noor answered "She follows the Afghani calendar. I cannot decipher that calendar anymore."

I repeated my orientation questions again and asked Mrs. Farhi to respond based on the Afghani calendar. To my surprise, she responded without a pause: "1389, Bahaar, 24, Seshhanbeh, Hamal." I entered her answers into an online Persian-Gregorian calendar converter. In seconds, her answer was translated accurately into "2010," "spring," "13," "Tuesday," and "April." Correct. I added five points to her score sheet.

I moved to her next low scoring item: serial sevens. "Did you sell 'akhrot' (walnuts) in your shop?" I asked.

Her gleeful response: "A lot."

I continued: "Let's assume that you sold 7 walnuts from a bag of 100. How many would have been left after this trade?" She slowly moved the tip of her thumb through the creases of her fingers and responded "93." Subsequently "86, 79, 72," and "65" made their way into the score sheet, one-by-one.

I congratulated Mrs. Farhi and Noor. She had scored 27 points out of a possible 30. The spectre of dementia slowly lifted and disappeared from of the examination room.

Looking back from the door of the examination room, I saw a proud mother and a caring daughter bowing their heads in respect and smiling contentedly. I slowly made my way towards the written piece of paper—the upper half of which contained artistically written scripture in Farsi, and the lower half, an English translation containing the following:

"I have no worries about my memory, or the results of the memory test. But, today, for the first time in last 5 years, I am having an experience that someone is really trying to understand me, and my welfare."

Six months later, I received a one-pound package and a letter written by Noor. It read:

"Mother is doing very well. She is more confident, and explains to everyone how well she performed in her memory test. I have not seen her forgetful, either. She has been repeatedly requesting me to send you some dried fruits and lots of blessings. Thank you."

Acknowledgement: I sincerely thank the Deputy Editors of JGIM for their assistance in editing the manuscript.

Corresponding Author: Satyaajeet Roy, MD, FACP; Cooper University Hospital, Department of Medicine, 1103 North Kings Highway, Suite 203, Cherry Hill, NJ, USA (e-mail: roy-satyaajeet@cooper-health.edu).