HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Hiding Behind the Hippocratic Oath

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He came to me innocently enough; his mother, a patient of mine, called me first. “Could you see my son... soon? He’s home for a short break from college.”

How soon is soon? I cringed, looking at a schedule that was spilling over.

Before I could stonewall, she quickly appealed to my ego and professional curiosity.

“He’s been experiencing numbness, fatigue, headaches.... We’ve been to multiple specialists, and nobody can tell us what’s going on.”

Unfortunate for her, after 20 years of foot-soldier primary care in a county hospital, I am rarely curious. Listening to her, I had already guessed his diagnosis. What made me cave that day was her tone, one of unwavering insistence. Stifling a sigh, I said “Will this Thursday work for him?”

Days later, I met this young man with the anxiety problem. It was late August. The weatherman had promised a scorching day. By the time I got around to see him, the cleaning crew had already punched in. I trudged around the mops, water buckets, and wet splotches on the floor. Across the way, I spotted him, waiting patiently, his head bowed and hands tightly clasped between his knees.

I knocked on the door gently, but still managed to surprise him.

He looked up and jumped up at the same time. Before I knew it, towering above me was a big, round face studded with a weekend growth and scared, menacing eyes.

I backed off, sat down, and left him standing. Once seated, I busied myself at the desk. And without looking back (or at him), I reached for the door and slammed it closed. The young man looked on with mild amusement. He too stepped back and sat across from me.

“What can I do for you?” I started—as I had done so many times that day.

“I’ve been experiencing dizzy spells that come and go. I get them when I’m driving, resting, doing stuff. A few times, I felt as if half my body went numb. Sometimes, it’s in my head.”

I hummed and nodded; he leaned toward me eagerly.

He continued, “But I’ve never passed out. I just keep driving....”

I listened patiently to a well-rehearsed menagerie of bizarre symptoms: flashing in his eyes, lightning sensation on his scalp, tingling in his lips.... I frowned at one curious fact: somehow, everything had begun abruptly, 1 year ago.

He pattered on. To better use my time, I started to scan the computer for notable events in his past, and a header popped up under “Social Work”. It turned out to be an intervention meeting. As a teen, he smoked pot. In spite of his promise to quit, the counselor wasn’t convinced.

I decided to test his honesty. “Do you use drugs or alcohol?”

“Yes, I do.” he said without any hesitation. “I used to smoke *a lot* of pot. Now I use it daily, but not as much. I’ve done hard drugs—just about every kind—but I lost my taste for them.”

His frankness and exactness surprised me and mollified a growing impatience with what seemed to me a blatant lack of insight into his own problem.

“Are you anxious or depressed?” I said, trying a direct approach.

“No, I’m doing okay.” He looked genuinely puzzled and slightly taken back by my question.

“How are you doing in school, at home, with relationships, and how about money?” I shot questions at him without giving him time to reflect.

“I’m doing all right in school. I think I might go to grad school. I’m dating a girl; she’s all right. We’re getting along.”

Just all right? Everything is just all right. What are you not telling me? Or yourself? How bad can it be? More frustrated than bored, I leaned back slowly and stretched my legs ramrod straight until I began to feel the distinct pain of pulled calf muscles.

Trying one more time, I took a deep breath, leaning forward, and said, “Whatever you tell me will never leave this room.”

He looked past me, and for once he was quiet. I waited—with the stillness and silence of a predator.

“I’ve never told anybody this,” he said, addressing the floor. “Two years ago, I was bussing tables and selling drugs on the side. One kid bought drugs from me and went berserk; he ran down the street screaming and got into it with the cops. They shot and killed him.”

Surprised, I was also getting more alarmed by the second; my silence, no longer forced.

“They went looking for the dealer and arrested a man who looked just like me.”

“And nobody knew about this?” I asked stupidly.

“Nobody.” He stole a peek at me. How I hoped the look of rapport and acceptance remained frozen on my face.

“When the news came out in the papers, they included a picture of the man. I used to sport dreadlocks. People who worked with me in the restaurant joked that it was me who was arrested because we looked so much alike. After that summer, I left to go to school. Ever since then, whenever I come home, I get these dizzy spells. They’re especially bad when I pass a police car. At night, the flashing headlights of cars behind me reminded me of the cops. I’m petrified that they might find me. My heart pounds and I’m weak all over.”

He turned to look at me trustingly, as if to ask: *So what do we do now?*

“Yes, yes... your symptoms are consistent with panic attacks,” I mumbled a brief explanation and maybe some

treatment options, then quickly excused myself and made a follow-up appointment for a few days later.

In the ensuing days, I cornered hospital lawyers and acquaintances in law enforcement, opening with a lame “Hypothetically, if...” They looked at me ruefully, with unspoken understanding. But with less evasiveness, they told me that neither the hospital nor I would be liable. However, if I was unwilling to betray the source, the police were unlikely to take me seriously.

Much to my surprise, he came back for a second visit, but we had little to say to one another. Most importantly, he had accepted my diagnosis and decided on his own that he would avoid coming home. He was ready to move on with his life. I agreed this was probably the best strategy.

I never saw him again. But that was when I started to question how *all right* my world was.

Working in an inner city hospital, I’ve heard my share of stories. Usually I avert my stare and deal with the aftermath discretely. I care, but not enough to take the drama home. Over the years, I’ve learned that I’m nothing if not realistic and pragmatic. Whether blood pressure or glucose control or the moral high ground, I adjust the bar for my patients and for me. They try, I try, and that has to be good enough.

But being one of only three people who knew an innocent man was in jail thwarted my momentum. For once, I felt an urgency to act. I could no longer perch high and dry on the moral aerie supported and validated by confidentiality, our proclaimed professional pride. My usual insensitivity and tolerance for crime and injustice fail to exonerate my inaction. I feel like a coward.

There was a time when I knew right from wrong. With unfettered, youthful exuberance cheered on by well-wishers, I chanted the Hippocratic Oath with sixty other bright-eyed medical students: “...I will keep secrets and will never reveal...”

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