

I First Met Them

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I met them on that first day which was a Friday in her hospital room with her husband sitting in a chair next to her; both of them in their 80's. She was sitting up in bed with a vacant smile, mildly short of breath, twirling a long stemmed red rose in her hands. It was a beautiful rose whose long stem still had its leaves though the thorns looked as if they had been meticulously removed. I said hello and asked her who the rose was from. Her husband answered, "I'm still trying to find out who her suitor is". Then, sheepishly, said, "Well, really it is me".

He had brought her to the Emergency room the night before because she was having difficulty breathing. However, she could not tell him why as she had advanced dementia. He was her loving caregiver as their 4 children lived in other states. The children would all be flying in this weekend for a family reunion that had long been planned, in 5 days.

In the Emergency room they did a CT scan of the chest and found a huge mass in her lung. They had tried to do a bronchoscopy to biopsy that mass but she nearly stopped breathing so they had to stop the procedure. However, they were able to see that the mass blocked the main stem bronchus, the main avenue to her lungs.

The day I met them, I introduced myself as a Palliative care nurse and told them my job was helping to manage symptoms, identifying various treatment options (including making sure they understood her current plan of care) ,and to explore goals such as curing a disease or prolonging life versus focusing only on comfort and minimizing discomfort. The patient's husband told me that because of his wife's advanced dementia she would not understand what was discussed, so he and I proceeded to my office for a private conversation.

He told me he knew it was "bad, there is a blockage in her lung but I still want her to get antibiotics and to be resuscitated". I described the lungs using the analogy of an upside down tree whose trunk (like the main stem lung bronchus) is blocked and because of this; the leaves and branches (airways) cannot get oxygen, nor do what they need to do such as clear secretions. I am not a doctor but I would guess that antibiotics might clear the pneumonia in the base of her lungs but only temporarily as the lungs could not clear themselves since there was a large blockage above it. I also gently discussed the treatment options including her resuscitation (code) status with the consideration not to resuscitate her as presently, she was full resuscitation and resuscitating her would not help her. Rather, to consider stopping all treatment except what would keep her comfortable. We also talked about Hospice. His affect was sad but he did not cry. He told me he wanted to speak with his children when they arrived. I apologized to him for not being able to be there with him when he spoke to his children as I would not be back until Monday.

Monday came, and I arrived at work and found her room empty. Her nurse reported to me a touching story. The patient's husband had brought her a new red rose every morning and kept vigil at her bedside, even sleeping there at night. The children arrived and realizing that death

was near, were supportive of their parents, gently encouraging their father to accept “comfort care” without the pain of attempted resuscitations doomed to failure, and without antibiotics which would only prolong her suffering. The husband was having a harder time. He kept trying to wake his wife up as she slowly became less responsive. He told the nurse, “I need to keep doing my job of trying to get her better”. The nurse gently explained that she was dying and even though she was losing the ability to open her eyes and respond to him, she could still hear him. She had him sit at his wife’s bedside, put his hand in his wife’s hand, put some soft music on, dimmed the lights, closed the door, and told the rest of the family to give them 20 minutes alone together.

That night, she died very peacefully surrounded by a loving husband and family. On the bedside table nearby, sat a vase of red roses, a testament of a husband’s undying love.