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WISDOM IN HEALTHCARE

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It was a slow Sunday morning. I was disinfecting used toys in the playroom: the castle from Frozen, a model airplane, a Star Wars Lego set, and an endless amount of plastic fruits and vegetables from the farmer's market stand. As unusual as it may seem, it somehow felt wrong to disinfect them. The children who played with these toys were cancer patients and would spend every minute of their day in that playroom if they could. Wiping away the traces of what segregated them as children from cancer patients felt like I was doing something I wasn't supposed to do. It wasn't my place to erase the evidence of the fleeting innocence that they possessed and that someone as young as 19 years old, like myself, would pay any price to get back. Nonetheless, it was a hospital — a children's hospital for that matter — and hospitals have protocols that must be maintained at any cost and disinfecting used toys happened to be part of the protocol.

I sat on the awkwardly small, hot pink princess chair and began wiping. A young mother came running into the playroom. Her expression was one that I would never forget. There was something about the plum-stained pillows under her tired eyes, softened by the infallibility of her smile, that was oddly comforting to me. She nervously asked me if I would mind watching her daughter for a few hours while she and her

husband went out for lunch with their family who had come to visit. I was slightly taken aback by her hesitancy in asking me, as if there was a chance that I would refuse.

She walked me over to room 7 — her unsureness behind my commitment now made sense to me. The perimeter of the door was adorned with dozens of caution signs, pictograms, safety measures, and a singular sticker of a cartoon kitten at the center which desperately attempted to humanize it all. Room 7 was reserved for cancer patients who had undergone organ transplantation and anyone other than the patient's parents, nurses, or doctors were advised not to enter. I was a volunteer who came in every Sunday morning at the pediatric oncology unit, thereby implying that I definitely wasn't qualified to venture in.

Just as I was about to contritely inform the mother that I was forbidden from entering her room, she clenched my hand and frantically pleaded for me not to leave. It was her birthday and all she had wished for was to have lunch with her family and ensure that her daughter was taken care of. How could she possibly assume that I — who wasn't even deemed eligible by the hospital to step foot in her room — would be fit to watch over her child? Even though I sensed the guilt and uncertainty coursing through what felt like every vein in my body, knowing that I was bearing the trust of a mother somehow negated it all.

I received permission from the nurses and proceeded to conceal every inch of my body with layers of protective gear. I was practically unrecognizable and yet when I briefly glanced at my reflection in the glass window, I knew that this was exactly what I was meant to be doing.

I approached the crib in the center of the room — watching my steps and avoiding the wires that lined certain parts of the floor — and there lay the most precious two-year-old baby I had ever seen. She was delicate and was wearing a frilly pink dress. I was worried that she would be frightened by the state of my appearance given that I didn't look human at all, but she was unfazed by it. I realized she had probably seen more people encased in protective gear coming and going from her room than I ever had in my entire life. She had her father's nose and dark hair, but her mother's eyes and perfect smile shone through.

After giving it some thought, I was able to piece together from where this all bizarrely seemed familiar. I too was once a two-year-old who spent her days under supervision at the hospital and my mother was also once in the exact position of that same young mother with the tired eyes and the infallible smile. From what I was told growing up, my mother would similarly yearn for a moment of normalcy as she would spend her days restlessly praying for the health of her child. This may have been 17 years ago but some things — like a mother's willingness to sacrifice for her child at the expense of herself — never change. My mother never got a break but that didn't mean that she didn't deserve one.

I then felt a greater sense of responsibility over the baby girl who was a stranger to me just a few minutes ago. I watched over her as I dangled my hands — veiled by a pair of thick purple latex gloves — over her face while singing every nursery rhyme that had been locked away somewhere in my brain for far too long. There were moments when I found it hard to believe that this seemingly perfect, happy baby girl was both a transplant and cancer patient and wouldn't learn about it herself until years later, when her mother decides to tell her.

I still remember when my mother told me that I had spent most of my early childhood years in the hospital. I remember asking her to swear that she wasn't playing some sick prank on me — not that she was the type to ever think of doing something so unfathomable anyway. I remember everything making sense at that moment. Why I had to go on multiple yearly checkups when my friends would only have to go once. Why the doctor's office was always filled with specialists, medical students, trainees and never just a doctor. Why my family always closely watched what I was eating or how I was moving. It all made sense.

Hours have never felt so fleeting and her parents were already peering through the window. Her mother thanked me as I left, and my heart felt as if it was seconds away from jumping out of my chest. I felt as though by helping her, I had given back in some way to my own mother and that I had healed something in myself that I didn't realize needed healing.

The experience I had with the young mother and her daughter taught me that the patient isn't the only person who is affected in a medical context — they may be the ones who are physically bearing the illness but the consequences of their diagnosis spreads immediately to those who are closest to them.

The concept of wisdom is often closely associated with age and the diverse array of experiences that one gathers over the course of their life. In healthcare, wisdom is imperative to a physician's moral judgment and to their ability of making critical decisions. I will always remember this experience and will use the lessons that I have gained from it, along with those I will continue to gather, as I pursue my career in medicine. ■

Biographical note

Kamilia Shome is in her first year in the Undergraduate Biomedical Sciences Program at McGill University where she is majoring in Biochemistry. She strives to pursue a career in medicine after completing her undergraduate degree. Kamilia devotes most of her free time to volunteering at hospitals and is passionate about whole person care with a particular interest in oncology.