

In between innings

A ballgame, an interview and an unforgettable patient

BY DOUG MCMAHON, M.D.



“Crack”

The ball bounced off the bat and flew toward the midsummer sun as the announcer, sitting two feet away from me in the open-air box at Midway Stadium, yelled, “That one is going to drop for a double!”

He nonchalantly added, “I have Dr. McMahon, an allergy specialist, here today,” and quickly turned back to the game. “Adam Frost steps to the plate. We have one on, two outs.”

Then he said, “Today we will be speaking with Dr. McMahon, who has graciously joined us for peanut-free day at the Saint Paul Saints.”

“Crack”

The sound reverberated through the press box.

“Oh, a line drive to second base ... and the relay to first ... that ends the inning.”

As I sat in the wooden press box wearing a headset on that warm summer afternoon, the announcer asked me a few questions about allergies. Then he asked me one that caused me to stop and think. “You must have seen thousands of patients. Do any of them stand out?”

In a moment I was back in 2004 at Georgetown Hospital, where I was a third-year medical student.

It was already after 8 p.m. I was exhausted, starving and wondering how I would find the energy to study when I got home, plus be back at the hospital by 6 the next morning.

The halls were bright, but the rooms were dark. A little light from the winter night outside shined through the windows into the old hospital. I looked at my list of patients and labs and, instead of walking out the front door, slowly headed to the south wing.

So tired, I walked without lifting my feet much, without raising my chin far off my chest.

When I got to Mr. Lee’s room, I shook my head to wake up and appear energetic.

Knock, knock.

I waited a few seconds and then entered the dimly lit room. Mr. Lee was sitting in a chair with his feet on a table watching TV. He was terribly thin but because of his distended abdomen looked as if he were eight months pregnant. A smile crossed his gaunt face.

“Hi Dr. McMahon.”

“Hi Mr. Lee.”

I didn’t ask how he was feeling because I knew the answer.

“How are your daughters?” I asked instead, as I knew this always cheered him up. He smiled as he told me about his daughters. Then he said, “My legs are so sore. Can you massage them?” I didn’t think this was an unusual request because I knew Mr. Lee’s stomach cancer was severe and the secondary cancers were causing him pain everywhere.

We sat for about a half hour. I massaged his legs until he started to drift off to sleep.

When I walked out of the hospital into the snow-speckled night, all I could think about was the reading I needed to do and the sleep I needed to get before I had to be back in the hospital.

The next morning, I walked back with the same black sky overhead. At the hospital, I was greeted by the bustling sounds and energy of the staff and as quickly as possible went back to seeing my patients. It wasn’t until mid-afternoon when things finally calmed down that I realized I was switching rotations the next day and would no longer be working with the same group of patients. I decided to talk to all of my patients that afternoon and let them know they would be taken care of by someone else the next day.

When I got to Mr. Lee’s room, he was in his chair. His yellow face and eyes slowly turned to me and he tried to muster a smile. I sat next to him and said, “Mr. Lee, I am changing services tomorrow



and someone else as qualified or more will be taking care of you.”

I paused for a few moments and then continued, “I am sorry I was not able to cure you.”

He looked up at me and his eyes showed the most energy I had seen in weeks as he said, “Dr. McMahon, you are the best doctor I have ever had.”

As a third-year medical student, I felt like a failure. I certainly couldn’t cure him, nor could I prolong his life. I didn’t know quite what to say but said, “Well, you know, Mr. Lee, I am only a medical student and not a doctor.” Then he said something I will never forget as long as I practice.

“I know I am going to die soon, and I have known for a long time that I didn’t have much time left. Yet through all of this, you are the only one who still treated me, as well as my family, as a person rather than a disease. And for that I am forever grateful.”

Mr. Lee passed away that night.

“Crack”

The sound of the bat brought me back to the press box. I didn’t have much time between innings to say much in response to the announcer’s question, so I simply answered, “Mr. Lee, a patient I had many years ago, and he didn’t even have allergies.”

Yet after all these years, Mr. Lee is the one patient who sticks in my mind, who lives on in my memory, reminding me to always treat patients as people and not the disease or disorder they have. *MM*

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