

Uncharted

Winner of the Penelope Gray-Allan Memorial CJEM Writing Award

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“When you have a moment, could you please pronounce the patient in room 17?”

I look at the chart being placed in my hand. Along the top is a stapled rhythm strip, dated and timed, displaying a distinct flat line. My eyes linger for a moment at the patient’s date of birth: 1980. Same year as mine. I had been putting off my charting on this particular patient; I didn’t know what to write.

As I approach the room, the patient’s parents emerge from an opening in the curtain. Her mother falters for a moment, her knees threatening to buckle, but she is supported by her husband. Our eyes meet, and they nod at me. I sense a lump build in my throat and I tightly grip the clipboard in my hands to keep it together. We all look away and they walk quickly to the Quiet Room.

I take a moment to chart.

History of Presenting Illness:

- 30F, currently palliative. Presents in fulminant hepatic failure
- Known w/ primary biliary cirrhosis. HCV +ve secondary to blood transfusions
- Failed liver transplant 1 week ago due to extensive abdominal adhesions

My stalling earns me a stern look from the nurse. I slowly pull back the curtains. Her husband is lying in the

bed with her. Tears flow freely down his face as he carefully combs her hair. I sense the emotion build again and look down at the chart in my hands. Below the rhythm strip is the patient’s demographic information and name and contact for next of kin. I start thinking of what I might write next.

Observations:

- Patient still, no apparent signs of life
- Cachectic and jaundiced
- IVs discontinued and patient removed from monitor

“Can you believe I forgot her lip gloss?” My thoughts are broken by her husband’s voice. Steady, despite the tears. “Since the weather changed, her lips have been cracking. I meant to grab it before we left and I completely forgot.”

I put down my pen, pull up a stool, and sit down.

He speaks quietly but clearly, with long pauses between statements. “She liked to wear her hair down; ponytails never framed her face well.” He chuckles softly. “She’d be so mad at me if anyone saw her hair like this.”

He carefully fixes her bangs so they nicely frame her face. A soft smile on his face while he works. When he decides they are just right, his hand slowly brushes her cheek and he kisses her forehead.

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Submitted December 30, 2010; Accepted February 16, 2011

This article has been peer reviewed.

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CJEM 2011;13(3):143-144

DOI 10.2310/8000.2011.110462

Keywords: end of life, humanity, medicine

I'm not sure how long I sat there. Five, maybe 10 minutes. In that time, I don't remember saying anything. Just listening. He never once spoke of her many medical problems or the failed surgeries—the things I had spent considerable time reading about in her chart. Instead, he spoke about her toes. He didn't really like the colour purple, but she thought red and pink were too trendy, so he'd been painting her toes purple. But not her fingers. She didn't like nail polish on her fingers. He also spoke about gum. She always blew bubbles with her chewing gum. It drove him crazy. She never bought *real* bubble gum, just the minty stuff. But somehow, she still managed to blow bubbles with it.

A picture from their wedding day had been placed on the counter in the room. I recognize the husband immediately. The woman takes me longer, and given the dramatic change in her appearance, I am only able to place her by association. On the floor is a small suitcase. I assume it is filled with more of her things. I suspect they thought they'd have more time.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

My gaze turns back toward the husband. He isn't referring to the woman in the photograph. His eyes are fixed on the woman lying motionless in the hospital bed.

Carefully, he gets up out of the hospital bed and covers her arms and legs with a blanket, tucking her in gently. "I guess it's time for you to do your thing?"

"If you're ready, yes," I say.

"Do you mind if I stay?"

"No, not at all."

I quietly go about doing my exam and completing my chart.

General Appearance: vitals signs absent.

Patient unresponsive to external stimuli

HEENT: Pupils fixed and unresponsive

Resp: Respirations absent

CVS: heart sounds absent

Assessment: Patient deceased

My eyes scan the pages in front of me. The chart I had been turning to for answers suddenly holds none.

I look up to find that her husband is still watching me.

"What time did you write?"

"I haven't yet. But I was going to write time of death at 10:17 am."

"Do you mind if we make it 10:20? She really liked even numbers."

"10:20 it is then."

Competing interests: None declared.