

ENCOUNTERS

Compliance

“Sure doc. Whatever you think would be best.” I must have heard that phrase a dozen times in the last few weeks. Sometimes, you can hear the exhaustion behind the words: patients too tired and confused to decide further. Sometimes, you hear the apathy: patients humouring us by letting us treat them. Whether a reflection of exhaustion or apathy, those words seem to signal that patients have separated themselves from their own care.

Recently, I saw a young man with dangerously high glucose levels nearly refuse treatment because of the strict diet suggested by his doctors. I saw an elderly woman end up back in hospital because she didn't fill her prescription for antibiotics. We call these patients noncompliant.

“I would like to go home to be with my wife,” one patient said, breathlessly, in his quiet, guttural voice. We did everything we could to help him do that. He came in with a pneumonia; we treated it. We found a second pneumonia, with pleural effusions; we drained the effusions, treated the presumed aspiration pneumonia and made sure to get a speech-language pathology assessment to reduce the risk of food aspiration. Nonetheless, my daily presence seemed to be a bother. We began a routine:

“May I examine your chest, Mr. Kuper?”

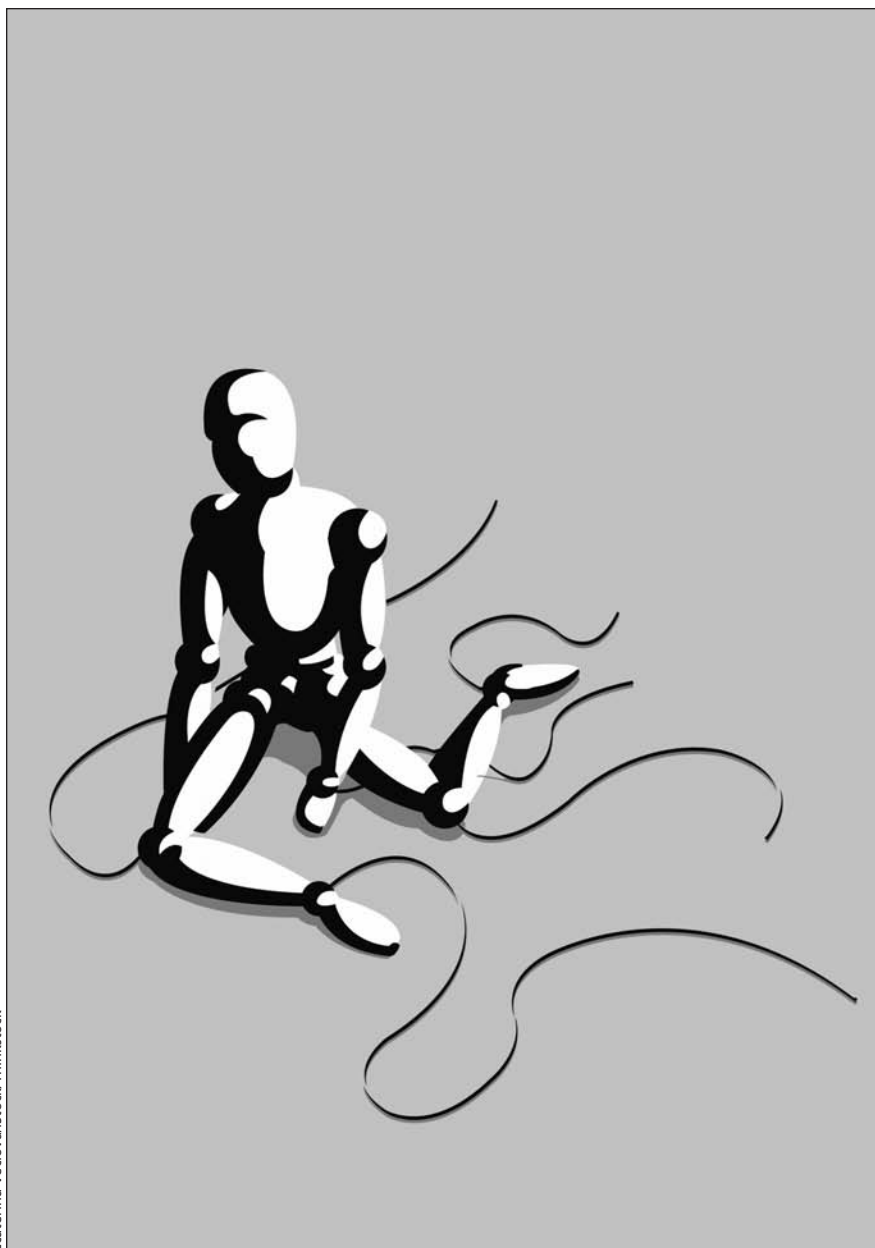
“No.”

“If I examine your chest, we can help you get better to go home to your wife.”

“No.”

It would go on like this for a few minutes until, finally, I would convince him — or he would humour me — into letting me examine him.

He would close his sunken eyes and sigh, the hard lines etched into his face softening ever so slightly. Frail hands would tremble to the top of his gown



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and tug ineffectually, trying to help me with my task. Slowly, we would proceed with the exam, working in tandem to figure out what was keeping him from home.

Over those two weeks, I came to know his wife. She told me of their childhood home, how they came to Canada

with \$3, of the hardware store they ran for 60 years in rural Ontario. She told me their stories, of their hopes and dreams and of the years they spent together.

I spent my evenings thinking about the couple and the many more years they could spend together. About why his pneumonia might not be going away.

About what it means to grow old with another person and what it might be like to grow old with my own love. About what it must be like to be with that person through illness and yet have illness keep you far — desperately far — apart.

When the pleural effusions recurred, we did a computed tomography scan. Metastases, it showed, in his lungs. It knocked the breath out of me. I imagined Mrs. Kuper's tears streaming down her elegant, rouged face, inconceivable. I imagined Mr. Kuper's wide eyes staring into the terror of death. Would he ever be able to go home to his love? Their actual response couldn't have been more different.

During the family meeting, I could barely hold my tears at bay, and my hands shook almost as badly as my

voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Kuper, you know Mr. Kuper had colon cancer some years ago. The cancer seems to be back, in his lungs this time."

Mr. and Mrs. Kuper gazed toward each other, knowingly and tenderly, for a long moment. And then Mrs. Kuper started speaking. "We're old," she said, shrugging. "We've outstayed our welcome. If he has to go, let him do it comfortably. That would be best. If only I could go with him, I would." Mr. Kuper reached for her hand. "I agree. I've been here too long." At last we understood what *they* thought would be best.

I spent the next few days organizing palliative care, making sure Mr. Kuper was comfortable and that he and his wife were managing. One day, I stopped by his room, just to keep him

updated. He commented sharply, "You come by three times today! You talk with my wife for nearly an hour!"

"Is that too much? Should I come less?"

"No, no," he said. "Thank you."

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POETRY

Poem for the anesthesiologist

Doctor, the crow's feet by your eyes run deep,
and I am grateful for that.

Doctor, I hope your baby slept through the night,
that your lover didn't leave you yesterday,
that it is not the anniversary of
a parent's death.

Please hold tightly to all that you have learned.
Let the sight of stainless steel and fluorescent lights please you.
Hold to all the nights you stayed close to books and
measurements and labs. Recall your love for math,
the feeling of falling in love with chemistry.

Don't think about the grocery list,
or the pull of the tides off Ocean Beach.
Just measure and calculate, and measure again,
and watch me breathe.

The ocean will be there. Your lover
will make you dinner tonight; your baby
is healthy and well rested.

Just put me under, enough not to feel and hear,
and pull me up —
in my new body, pieced together with fat and sutures
and threads that dissolve over time. Let me
open my eyes and see both questions and answers,
both nightfall and dawn,
the stars I always wish upon,
the questions on my children's faces.



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Bring me back for yet another moment at the too-long red light,
where I can run my left hand through a fistful of hair,
tangles from the smallest knots tugging the roots, a strand
caught between my fingers.

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