

# Treading water

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**M**y middle son, Matthew, recently enrolled in the Bronze Star course offered by the Royal Life Saving Society of Canada. At 10 years old, he was the youngest in the class, which included his brother and cousin. Part of the requirement was to be able to swim for one minute holding a 10-pound brick. Up until the last class, Matthew had been unable to do it; he had even dropped the brick once, and his somewhat exasperated cousin had needed to retrieve it from the bottom of the pool. Because I could not enter the pool area, owing to COVID-19, I made Matthew's older brother promise to encourage him. As I drove the three boys to their last class, the car was filled with advice.

"You need to keep your chin above the water, and keep kicking your legs, and whatever you do, don't drop the brick, even if it feels too heavy, because no one is going down to fetch it," his brother said.

"As soon as the time is up, we'll pull you out of the water," his cousin added.

"I am trying," Matthew replied, "but it feels like I'm drowning and it seems to take forever for the lifeguard to blow the whistle ..."

I can relate. As a cancer surgeon, I carry my own heavy load, and have done so since I started my practice in 2008. I am responsible for helping guide patients across the cancer journey, from diagnosis, through cancer staging, surgical resection, postoperative care, and finally to another oncologist for additional treatments or on to a survivorship program. I don't think of it as a brick, but rather as a backpack filled with precious stones, like diamonds. Each stone is a patient who needs me to help carry them from one side of the cancer journey to the other, safely, efficiently and with compassion.

My backpack is always with me and although I put it down from time to time, it is never too far away. My family knows



all too well about my backpack. A page from the laboratory with a critical blood result during movie night, a call from the radiologist because of a concerning finding on the CT scan during a soccer game, a text message about a postoperative patient with a fever right before the piano recital: all these mean that I must stop what I am doing, find the backpack and pick it up. The electronic medical record is linked to my iPhone so it can buzz me directly when a new patient result is available or another health care provider has a question. Even my Apple Watch can tap me on the wrist with an important clinical message: *tap-tap-backpack*.

Despite its requirement for constant attention, I have never resented my backpack. Looking after my patients is integral to the oath I took in medical school many years ago, and being there for them is what makes this job so satisfying. It is a privilege to be able to help them, which is why the last year of the COVID-19 pandemic has been indescribably hard.

As a cancer surgeon, I haven't had to make decisions about who gets a ventilator or an ICU bed, but the resource constraints imposed by the pandemic are insidious, chronic and constant, as they slowly erode my resilience and fortitude. Behind every biopsy that gets delayed weeks to months, and every CT scan that cannot get booked because it is not a high enough priority, and every surgery that gets cancelled or delayed because of the pressure on our already strained health care system, is a patient — a diamond in my backpack. Every time I have to give a patient a cancer diagnosis while they sit alone in the clinic because their family cannot attend with them, I know they deserve more. Every time I have to reassure a family member by phone that, although their loved one has had a serious complication, we are doing everything we can, and yes, I too wish they were allowed to be at the bedside, I share in their frustration. Every time, so many times, I feel like I have failed them. In the last 12 months, I have spent

hours advocating, imploring, begging, pleading and sometimes even crying, in an effort to get the resources I need to care for my patients with cancer. I am not the only one. The other doctors, nurses and administrators at my hospital are working just as hard and struggling just as often, but that doesn't make it any easier.

Since the pandemic began, the weight of my backpack has not changed, but it is as if I am now swimming with it. In the beginning I was a strong swimmer with legs whirling rapidly and head held high. We were in this together and I had the determination and faith that we would get through it. Now, as the crest of yet another COVID-19 wave further constrains the resources for my patients with cancer, I feel the weight pulling me under. My legs are so tired and my chin is barely above the surface. If I drop the backpack, it will sink to the bottom with devastating consequences, but right now, I feel like I'm drowning.

I know I am not alone. Many of us are struggling to tread water. I don't know what else to do but keep kicking and breathing and just hope that the lifeguard will blow the whistle so we can finally pull each other out of the water.

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