



## Thursday Memo – November 13, 2014

### A Positive Experience – by Felipe Fernandez-del Castillo

During chart rounds we spend less time discussing challenging diagnoses than we do discussing challenging patients and their social context. I admit I have an instinctive skepticism about this sort of thing, but I would like to share a short anecdote that taught me how satisfying it can be to provide holistic care to families, rather than simply solving medical problems.

A 6-year-old boy came in for removal of several warts on his hands. Earlier in the day my preceptor explained to me that the boy's mother, also a patient, had recently developed an alcohol problem, became severely depressed, and had just gone through a messy divorce. My preceptor was managing her patient's depression as best she could, and told me that she was going to pull mom aside, "just to check in", leaving me to take care of the 6-year-old's warts.

I noticed my preceptor pause before entering the room, her lips bending into a smile that looked natural. She walked in brandishing the nitrogen canister like a machine gun, firing it wildly to the delight of our patient and his 4-year-old brother. "Want to try?"

She watched me freeze a few warts off our patient's fingers, then left to "just chat quickly" with the patient's mother. Three minutes later she was back in, her hand on mom's shoulder, her smile still beaming like a kindergarten teacher's. She examined my work, then filled a Dixie cup with water so the boys could experiment with compressed nitrogen and water.

The warts were frozen, and the kids had a blast. I suspect my preceptor would have liked to do more. I suspect she would have liked to fix everything for that family: from the parent's marriage, to mom's depression, to the kids' dirty pants which were worn through at the knees. I know she wasn't satisfied, because when we walked back across the hall to her office, she wasn't smiling anymore. Normally hyper-efficient, now she sat heavily at her desk, staring blankly at the ceiling. Uncomfortable with the amount of emotion packed into the tiny office, I felt I needed to say something. "So-that's *family* medicine, huh?" "Yep," she said. "That's the point, at least."