



## *Thursday Memo – March 19, 2015*

### **Scavenger Hunt** - by Shu Yang

Thank you everybody for allowing me to be a part of this special day and congratulations everyone! I know it feels like you still have a long road ahead, but know that you have already accomplished so much and that you are just getting to the best part of medical school.

Thinking back, I remember sitting in your seats just 2 years ago and I recall feeling both nervous and excited, all the while wondering: "what is it going to be like as a third year student on the wards?" I thought of a lot of things - the patients I would see, the teachers I would encounter - but one thing I could have never predicted was spending the better part of a day on a scavenger hunt in the hospital.

Now to give you some background, I was on my general surgery rotation at the time and my resident had just sent me to see a new patient - Frank. Frank was an 86 year-old man with widespread lung cancer. He had come to the hospital 3 days ago feeling short of breath and by report, he was getting better. I was instructed to ensure things were still moving in the right direction.

When I arrived at Frank's room, he certainly looked the part of someone battling cancer. He was thin and pale, and too weak to walk on his own. When I asked him how he was feeling, his response was fragmented by regular pauses to catch his breath. He insisted however, that he was doing fine. As we moved on to the topic of his cancer, the tone of his voice grew heavier. He clearly had a lot on his mind and was struggling to process his illness, but again, he held firm that he was ok.

Frank had lived a good life. He served in the navy during World War II and had plenty of stories to share, especially about the beautiful nurses on board his ship. He was also the loving father of two wonderful sons, both of whom had become accomplished chefs. As a foodie, he was particularly proud of their career choices.

At this point, Frank finally cracked a smile, but he still seemed bothered by something. When I asked what, he shared that the hospital had lost his dentures when he came through the emergency department. As a result, he had been subsisting on various forms of hospital porridge - delicious, I know. Worse yet, he might not be able to eat any solid food for weeks, until his dentures could be replaced.

In light of everything Frank was going through, to be deprived of such a basic pleasure seemed unacceptable. Something needed to be done and with the support of my entire surgical team, a

fellow medical student and I embarked on a mission to find Frank's missing teeth. We combed the floors, engaging everyone from janitorial staff to nurse managers; we even sought the aid of transport services. Several hours later, we finally reached the emergency room lost and found closet, inside of which we stumbled upon the most glorious piece of acrylic I have ever seen. Following a joyous shriek from my co-medical student, we quickly rushed up to Frank's room and delivered the good news - after of course a vigorous brushing and thorough rinsing.

Seeing Frank's eyes light up in that moment was perhaps the most gratifying experience I have had in medical school, topped only by the sight of him biting into a burger later that day. To know that I could provide even an ounce of joy and comfort to someone going through such hardship was powerful to say the least. As I stand before you and reflect on the past couple years, this encounter with Frank is what I remember most vividly about being a medical student on the wards.

As you all take your oath today, you will be taking a first step into the world of clinical medicine. Throughout the course of this journey, you will learn so much about how to form differentials, come up with treatment plans, and maneuver around the maze that is a hospital. At times, you may find yourselves overwhelmed by how much you have to do and tempted to abandon the so-called "lower-yield" aspects of patient care. However, I urge you to resist this temptation, to remember why you wanted to be doctor in the first place, and to not lose sight of who your patients are beyond their age, gender, and diagnoses. Each time you sit down to shake a patient's hand I encourage you to listen to his/her story and think about how you can care for that person as a human being. Whether holding their hand or diving for dentures, even the simplest of gestures can have a profound impact on the lives of those you serve. And at the end of the day, trust me, it will be worth it.