



Thursday Memo – November 5, 2015

Best Part of My Day – by Mary Lindholm

I have many students who are trying to decide between pediatrics and family medicine who ask me how I decided on family. I explain that initially I was actually planning on becoming a pediatrician, but during my third year of medical school, realized that although I loved caring for children, I also really liked adults. At the time, it was mostly younger adults that I had developed an affinity for. But over the years, I have grown to love my geriatric patients. I love their stories, and missing my own parents, I love the parental way they sometimes speak with me.

There was Mr. T, a gentleman from Puerto Rico, who spoke a dialect that only our local interpreters could understand completely. I, unfortunately speak very little Spanish and am shy about trying it, so relied heavily on the interpreters. We found common ground around baseball; he consistently wore a Yankees hat which I would gently rib him about. He switched to wearing a hat that just said “Jesus” on it. When I asked what happened to his Yankees hat, he told me he stopped wearing it for fear of offending me. After my reassurances that he couldn’t offend me, I awkwardly said, “Adios?” as he was leaving. He smiled and teasingly said, “so you do speak Spanish.”

Mrs. S is from a country in Eastern Europe that I have trouble pronouncing. I have come to understand that a long, painful hospitalization and recovery from Potts disease as a child has made her wary of medicines and the healthcare system. She has the kind of hypertension that takes 4 meds to control and is very resistant every time I want to add a new medicine. I am very nervous she will have a stroke if I don’t get her pressure down. She grabs my hands while I’m trying to gently reason with her about the need for another med, and worries over why my hands are so cold. She then reminds me of the importance of dressing warmly.

Maria speaks English with a strong Albanian accent. She has been lonely since her best friend, a transplanted New Yorker, unexpectedly died. Part of the problem is that she doesn’t want to just spend time with the other Albanians who live in her building. “They only speak Albanian” she complained with some disdain. It wasn’t initially clear to me why this was important, but then she told me her story.

She was born in the United States, but in her teens, she moved with her family back to Albania. Shortly afterwards World War II broke out, and Albania subsequently became part of the Soviet bloc. Maria and her family had to get rid of everything American in their home, even passports, or authorities could punish them. Maria went on with her life. She married and had children, but she worked very hard to maintain her English. She was able to watch an English

station on the TV and would translate the programs for her children to help keep her fluency and teach them English. She dreamed of returning to the US. One day, almost miraculously with just her birth certificate, she was able to return and has lived in Worcester since.

My very patient husband who has held off dinner until I get home on way too many nights asked me how long it took to hear this story.

“ 45 minutes” I say apologetically,” but it was the best part of my day.”

My patient’s life stories and their willingness to share them with me remind me that family medicine was the right choice for me.