



Thursday Memo – June 19, 2014

This is the final week of the TMM before the summer hiatus. I hope you all get to read great books, stories, essays and poems over the summer and watch great films, plays and other media that foster our collective humanity.

This week I have written about a recent encounter with a patient that got me thinking about what makes us special in family medicine when we just simply care about our patients. How can caring be so unusual in medicine and such a surprise for patients - especially those who are very vulnerable. Food for thought.

PS - we will be sending out a brief survey in July about the TMM - please take 5 minutes to fill it out - thanks.

You can respond to me at hugh.silk@umassmed.edu or to the listserv in general with comment. Enjoy!

"Why do you care so much?"

The questions caught me off guard. How does one define caring too much? Does asking a lot of personal questions to get to know someone constitute caring too much? Does taking time to counsel someone about their illness with specific practical advice count as caring too much? Or is it taking time to explain how the illness will affect their life while looking them in the eye and saying - "I really don't want this to happen to you."

Which brings us back to the "caring so much".

"Not sure what you mean. I'm just trying to explain things to you so you'll understand why I'm telling you to do all of this, and take your meds; and I don't want to see you get sicker. I've seen that, and it is not pretty."

"But, it's more than that doc. You actually *look* like you care. You explain things to me so I get it. And you tell me if you think I shouldn't be taking something rather than just loading me up on yet another med. I like that"

It seemed obvious to me and yet I have seen so many people who ask about an illness they have had for years like they just got diagnosed - because they know nothing about it. They stop medications because they don't know how it will help them.

People are curious creatures - I know I am. We all want to know how things work. I ask the mechanic what they did specifically to fix the engine of my car. I want to know why certain people eat a certain kind of food or celebrate a certain holiday. Why would a patient be any different?

"You got questions, you ask. I'll do my best to explain it. If you want to stop a med - come talk it over first. My rule of thumb, is to treat you like I would treat my brother or father. Why should you get care that is any less than that?"

"I like that doc. Makes me feel safe at least. Thanks"

And with that - he went back to his cell. On my first day in the prison, a PA said to me: "Treat these guys with respect and they will do anything for their health. No one treats them with respect; never; not before prison and certainly not in prison. That approach, creating that feeling will take you a long way."

Indeed it has.

When I went to medical school, I had barely taken a biology or a chemistry course (I was lucky to attend a school that did not require traditional MCAS scores and science prerequisites). I went to med school because I thought I could teach people about their health, use practical sense, act as an example and just try to be real with people since I had had so many interesting life experiences. I feel that this mission is coming to fruition. My dad was in prison years ago. I know he would have wanted respect then; these guys just want the same. It has to cut both ways - and when it does, it is powerful.