Thursday Memo – March 28, 2019

This week we hear from Caitlin Mann, who practices at Bourne-PMG Family Medicine in Bourne, MA and a fellow graduate of Hahnemann Family Health Center and the class of 2001. I have always had deep respect for Caitlin's care - even as a resident, it was top notch. So I appreciate her honesty in this piece and feel a personal sense of relief to know that even those I look up to, have thoughts like these. Makes me feel more human as a doctor trying my best.

You can respond to Caitlin at mjtclm@comcast.net or the listserv directly. Enjoy.

Ghosts

Ghosts, they come to me during a Sunday morning spin class unbidden.

I cannot let go of them and yet I do not want to forget them. I see them all from over the years.

The elderly woman with agitation at night caused by her GI bleed; he 50 year mother of two with chest pain for hours who never called 911; the patient with back pain that just did not respond to typical treatment and was diagnosed as unresectable pancreatic cancer; a 57 year old woman with no risk factors who had flank pain and hematuria and was then diagnosed with metastatic renal cancer.

I keep playing them all back, did I miss something? What did I not see? Would someone else have done something else different? Am I going to get sued? Should I get sued? Am I a bad doctor? Am I stupid?

Medicine is not easy, it is art and science. The human beings we care for have their own agendas and fears. They sometimes hold back information through denial, forgetfulness, or ignorance; it is up to us, the physician, to tease out the information, filter it, and decide if it is meaningful or not. The body is sometimes working against us, trying to manage itself with significant disease buried deep inside. At the end you think “how did I miss this?”

What is much harder to see is the vast majority of people we help. How do I quantify the things that did not happen? The smoker who I helped quit so they did not get lung cancer; the diabetic I helped control their sugars so they did not go blind; the person I supported through their grief so
they kept themselves and their family whole. I find in my wandering thoughts that I often cannot see the living - the dead stand in front of them.

It is this struggle that I feel most acutely as I try to “exercise,” “stay positive,” and “take time.”

How do I forgive myself when often there is nothing to forgive? Most of the time there is no actual wrong-doing, just the inability to always make something right or better.

How do I allow the ghosts to fade?