“Faith & Medicine”

Our topic “Faith and Medicine” can be understood in two ways: first, we have faith in the profession of medicine that it can heal us; and secondly, that within that profession we can exercise our religious faith in God. The richness of our Catholic tradition is that these two types of confidence collaborate and reinforce each other: the gifts of reason, intelligence and science; and the deeper gift of trust in our Creator and God. I personally feel grateful to DeSales University for what it provided in both areas: excellent professional preparation as well as a deepening of my Catholic faith. I’d like to share a few personal thoughts about trust, anxiety and faith expressed as charity.

I am Clare Grubb. I graduated from DeSales in 2002. I have been a physician assistant for last ten years. I met my husband, Dave, at DeSales. We live locally and we have four young children. I have been at Lehigh Valley Hospital since the time I graduated. I originally worked in neurosurgery. I worked in the OR, office and hospital for that practice. I liked the hospital setting the best and so then went on to work with the Hospitalist group in Internal Medicine. I worked with them for five years, and then an opportunity came up for me to work in Hematology-Oncology which is where I currently work. Oncology has been a great fit for me. Currently I work half-time. I work in the hospital for the group and so I primarily take care of patients being admitted for chemo or patients with complications from their cancer.

When I think about Faith and medicine the word trust comes to mind. To heal, a patient must trust the doctors, PA’s, nurses; the hospital or facility; the medications and the researchers who tested and created them. But ultimately, to heal and be healed, we need trust in God that he will imbue us with the wisdom and compassion we need for ourselves and our patients. When we allow ourselves to trust, it enables us to be free from anxiety.
In my work I sometimes feel anxious and worried. I worry about making the correct diagnosis, about controlling pain without over-sedating, about emotional and social stressors of my patients, or about how they will do when they leave the hospital and whether they will have enough support at home. It’s often a relief when we make a correct diagnosis, treat appropriately, relieve pain and restore the patient to peace. But how often we face conditions, physical or emotional, that we are unable to fix or “make better” the situations we encounter. I’ll give you couple examples of what I am talking about.

I have a patient who was admitted to the hospital twice in one month for unexplained fevers and pain. Despite an extensive workup and collaboration with multiple specialists, we were unable to come up with a clear diagnosis. When I had to discharge this patient home without the answers, it was very frustrating for me, not to mention for him and his family. Another example is a patient who has end-stage cancer and is dying from their disease. She is being made comfortable and we have been able to control pain. However, she has a deep level of anxiety about personal issues. All our attempts fail to relieve her of this emotional pain and suffering.

These situations can arouse immense anxiety in us as care-givers. At these moments we face our own powerlessness and limitations and incapacity to be “in control.” This is especially when we need to embrace our faith ... because medicine cannot always answer all our questions and problems. We need to trust that God is in charge—taking care of us and our patients.

As Catholics, we have extraordinary resources to deepen our faith and our union with God. First and foremost is the Eucharist. Recall that as a communicant, I am not alone; everything I do – every word spoken, diagnosis made, treatment suggested – can be done in the power of Christ. We cannot overestimate the greatness of this gift; having received our Lord in the Eucharist, we bring Him everywhere we go. Connected to this is Confession and of course daily prayer. These practices solidify and seal our union with our Lord – and it is His presence we bring to our patients.

I read a book a couple years ago by Fr. Joseph Langford called *Mother Theresa’s Secret Fire*, a book that had a great impact on my life and the way I practice medicine. Apparently, Mother Theresa would frequently count off on her five fingers, saying “you did it to me.” What we do to others we are doing to Christ. Mother Theresa reminds us “that our lives are an uninterrupted series of encounters with the Son of God, hidden in
the mystery, under what she called the “distressing disguise” of human pain and poverty.” This was a paradigm shift for me. She was calling the people that we encounter all day, every day, Christ in his “distressing disguise.” This can be the difficult patient or maybe the difficult colleague. Often I have prayed and asked God to help me love him more, and asked him how I can do this. These words are crystal clear: I have a precious opportunity to love Him every moment by loving those I encounter every day, especially those who are difficult to love.

For me this can mean a smile, showing concern, exhibiting calm and peace, a peace that we receive by abiding or resting, trusting in God. It can mean sitting down, listening to our patients. I recall a story about eight years ago when I was working in neurosurgery, I received a call from a nurse that the patient was refusing to wear her cervical collar for a neck fracture. When I got up there it was chaotic; she was irate and uncooperative. I spent quite a bit of time listening to her; then I explained why it was so important to wear her collar. After she knew someone understood her pains and concerns, her attitude changed and she became agreeable to wear the collar. We don’t always have a lot of time to spend with our patients. In fact, that is one of my biggest challenges – a lack of time. In medicine there is an expectation to work efficiently and meet time constraints. But we can use our time well by really listening and by recognizing the dignity in each patient. We don’t necessarily have to talk about Christ to bring Christ to our patients. It is in our mannerisms, actions, our empathy; the way we dress and present ourselves; and in how we respond to our patients questions and concerns.

We in the medical profession face immense pressures and stressors: time constrains, documentation, low staffing, legal concerns, family problems, and the list goes on. It would take a miracle for a doctor, PA or nurse to enter this chaos, tension and pain and there bring calm, gentleness, compassion, humor, concern, hope and even joy. But it is just such a miracle that we can expect, every day, many times a day, from the presence and power of our Eucharistic Lord. This, for me, is how “faith and medicine” can go hand-in-hand.

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