



Opinion

Mon, Oct. 4, 2010

Doctors' compassion crisis

By Steve Young

and William Scarlett

One Thursday in late 2007, Joy received a phone call from her surgeon and learned she had breast cancer. As you might expect, she was in shock and despair.

"What should I do?" she asked, her voice trembling and barely audible.

"Come into my office on Monday, and we'll discuss your options," the doctor said.

"But what do I do till then?" Joy sobbed.

"We can talk about that on Monday. You know, you're not my only patient."

That was all the guidance and comfort offered to Joy after she got what she considered her death notice. She would have nearly four more days to deal with the nightmare on her own.

Joy eventually found a caring surgeon who would give her both medical and emotional support over the next two years. Regrettably, she would also face more instances of unimaginable ignorance and incompetence among well-compensated medical professionals. These culminated with the head of a major hospital's pulmonary department asking Joy's mother if she would consider taking her off life support a day earlier than the family had planned because he was going on vacation.

I'll give you a moment to let that sink in. This unthinkable request came from a highly educated and skilled physician to whom Joy's family had entrusted her life. And he was asking it of the grief-stricken mother who was about to lose her only daughter.

Throughout her fitful struggle against breast cancer and then pancreatic cancer, Joy met many wonderful, supportive people in the medical field. But there were far too many so-called professionals who seemed unaware that every cancer diagnosis involves a real and frightened human being.

Few people if any are prepared for the words "You have cancer" - not patients, families, nor, unfortunately, many doctors. For the patient, it's a punch to the gut that can leave her unable to utter the first question of most new cancer patients, "Now what do I do?"

There are no grade-school classes on how to deal with such a diagnosis, but there should be plenty of them in every medical school. Appropriate "bedside manner" is a crucial part of proper care and treatment. Yet, as medicine grows more impersonal and technical, there has been a growing emotional distance between doctors and patients.

"Learning to more effectively communicate with our patients - to understand what makes them comfortable so they are more likely to hear what we have to say - is extremely important," said Dr. Ajay Bhatnagar, an adjunct assistant professor of radiation oncology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Bhatnagar led a study demonstrating that strong patient-physician relationships are essential.

"It isn't just about how we treat the cancer; it's about how we treat the person who has the cancer," said Dr. Beth Baughman DuPree, medical director of Holy Redeemer Hospital and Medical Center's breast health program.

In the 1991 film *The Doctor*, William Hurt plays a successful surgeon with a frigid bedside manner who learns what it's like on the other side of the bed when he is diagnosed with cancer. Short of experiencing a life-threatening disease, the film should be required viewing for anyone going into the medical field. Its producer, Laura Ziskin, a cancer survivor and cofounder of Stand Up to Cancer, points out that compassionate communication can be not only crucial to a patient's survival, but also a doctor's practice.

"I spoke to one doctor who made me feel like I was going to die," Ziskin said. "I spoke to another who made me feel like I was going to live. I went with the second one."

Hospitals spend millions on marketing to promote their empathy for patients. But until hospitals and doctors ensure that every patient is treated with compassion, their advertising, mission statements, and oaths will be empty words. "Chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation therapy can treat the cancer," DuPree said. "It is the physician's love that heals."

Steve Young is Joy's brother and the author of "Great Failures of the Extremely Successful." William Scarlett is a reconstructive surgeon who works with breast cancer patients in Bucks County.