Story Slam

Six years ago this June, I started my core internal medicine rotation at the Foothills in Calgary.

I was different then. I believed medicine was the application of science, and science was knowing all the answers. So all I needed to do, was have all the answers, and I too could be the best doctor.

But for right now, I didn’t know it all yet, so I wore a tie.

On my list of patients the first day was a 40 year old male, married, no medical history of note, 40 pack year smoker. Jumped off the bed of his pickup and shattered his femur. Pathologic fracture. Difficult repair. Transfer to medicine for underlying diagnosis.

Solvable. We will get the pathology. We will give him the answer. He will be cured.

I went into that room that day. He had some pain and was short of breath. Bit of cough. Flirting with the nurses and making jokes with his roommate. I said, “Just waiting for pathology.”

And I went back the next day. Less pain, more cough. Bit short of breath. Flirting and joking. “Just waiting for pathology”

And the day after that and the week after that and so on. Some days pain, some days cough. Always flirting, always joking.

Two weeks later he was on the commode. He didn’t answer the questions. “More of the same” the nurse said. “But hes not flirting any more. He’s done waiting”.

I left the team after my rotation having seen him every day for four weeks, and at that point now he was waiting for a hospice bed at the Peter Lougheed, closer to home. I went to visit when he was transferred. And I walked into the hospice unit and I froze. I pretended to play on my phone. I was embarrassed. He didn’t want to see me. Why would he? So I walked out.

I mustered the courage to come back days later. He was lying in bed watching TV, surrounded by candy and chocolate and flowers. His wife had just left. He was happy. He wasn’t in pain, not short of breath. He had stopped flirting but that was by choice. We gave me some frozen raspberries from his garden. We talked about his home and his life and whether his wife would be there, whether she should be there, when he passed.

I never saw him again and rarely thought of him, but four years later I was walking down the street on a cold and windy night and I remembered. I remembered what he looked like. I remembered his cold blue hands when his sat was 70%. I remembered the exhaustion on his face when he was sitting on that commode chair. I remembered the feeling of helplessness I had when his nurse told me he wasn’t flirting. I remembered his surprised smile in the hospice unit. I remember the taste of those raspberries still. And I started to cry because I had forgotten his name.

I don’t wear a tie anymore. I do not tell patients that I have answers. Medicine is not science. Medicine is questions. Medicine is emotions. Its being there with that person, in that moment, however they need you. And that’s because six years ago this June, I met Darryl, and he taught me that.