



I Think About the Son

Mr. R was amazing. He was diagnosed with kidney cancer. A huge tumor. Over 10 cm, I believe. As a man well into his 80s, he was at significant risk for surgery to remove the kidney. On top of that was the aortic valve disease. He had severe aortic stenosis. Of all the issues a patient can have that put them at high risk for surgery, severe aortic stenosis is top of the list. We had talked about that valve. Mr. R made it crystal clear that he wanted no part of aortic valve surgery. He was a bit of a cantankerous guy. Old school. World War II generation. The "Greatest Generation". Little things (like kidney cancer) don't bother me, and, if they do, I certainly won't complain about them!

So, he went for the robotic nephrectomy. His kidney was removed.

It was FLAWLESS. Mr. R. didn't bat an eye. You would never know he was an octogenarian. You would never know that he had severe aortic stenosis. Discharged a few days later. Kidney out. Cancer out. Like swatting away a mosquito. Nuthin!

Shortly thereafter, I heard that Mr. R had COVID. I assumed that he would be fine. After all that he had been through, this was another mosquito.

He was admitted to the 10th floor Pavilion building. Hmm.

I wasn't anxious to go see Mr. R. I am in my 50s and am at high risk myself for complications from COVID. Frankly, at that time, I was scared myself. I did not want to put myself at risk unless it was absolutely necessary. I was not asked to see Mr. R - there was no cardiology consult. He was stable from a cardiac perspective. I would follow him on Epic.

A few days later, however, I was anxious. Given my relationship with Mr. R, and his wife who generally accompanied him to office visits, I thought I should go up there and see what was happening. Perhaps I could reassure them both. Perhaps a familiar face would aid in his healing. His wife had always been pleasant and warm (certainly warmer than her husband!). I'm sure they would both be happy to know that I was around.

I went up to the floor and found his room. "Enhanced Respiratory Isolation". This was routine. I went to find his nurse to see if I could get some information.

As I walked past the room, I glanced at the name on the room next door. It was the same last name. How odd!

When I found Mr. R's nurse, I asked if the patient in the next room over was a relative. "His wife", she said as I gasped. "The son was just here and made them both DNR. They are both unresponsive, and both dying from COVID".

I think about that son quite often. I have never met him, and I have not spoken to him. I knew both of his parents quite well. I loved them. I appreciated them for the human beings they were. I think about my parents, whom I lost in the last five years. They died about two years apart. I cannot imagine what it was like on that day to say goodbye to both of the people that gave him life, nurtured him, raised him, and created his home. Both suddenly, unexpectedly, and simultaneously. How devastating that must have been! How unsettling. How hard it must have been for him to make the decision to let them both go.

None of us will ever be the same after this pandemic. Life will never be the same.

For some of us, it is more personal, more tragic, more directly impactful on our day-to-day living.

I am grateful to be alive. I am grateful for the vaccines. I am grateful for the opportunity to visit with friends and take off my damn mask! I am grateful that I was able to limit my exposure to infection.

And I am grateful for the people who stared this monster in the face...day after day....and did their work without flinching. Hospitalists, nurses, residents, therapists, food service workers, housekeeping, transport, technologists of all sorts, and on and on. They faced this menace with courage and served without concern for themselves. This is another "Greatest Generation".

And I will not forget those who lost loved ones. I will not forget Mr. and Mrs. R's son – another Mr. R. He will never get his parents back. Millions are feeling that aching, unquenchable pain. I am filled with gratitude. I am filled with sorrow. I am filled with awe in the face of the sacrifice and loss of others.

I am going to call Mr. R this week and see how he is doing...

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