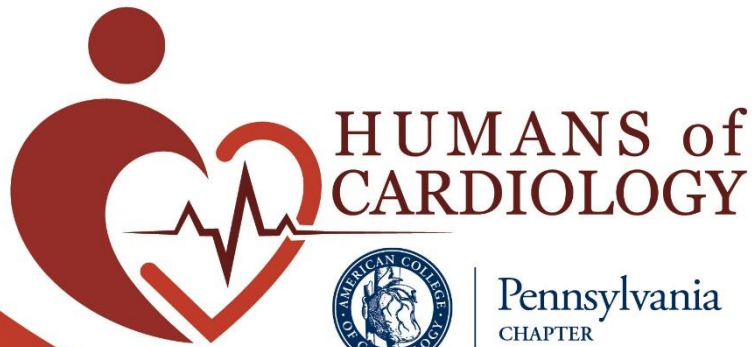


## OPEN FORUM INITIATIVE



"Doctor, I've been short of breath with any exertion, and my legs are swelling up" said Mr. M, a man in his 40's, disheveled and cachectic, who had never seen a doctor in his entire life. He moved to the city several months ago looking for a job, but was not able to find any. He had the best mitral stenosis murmur I had ever heard. Mr. M got admitted to the hospital and was diagnosed with severe rheumatic mitral and tricuspid stenosis. His auscultation findings were textbook-quality, and he couldn't afford surgery, therefore, he was recruited as a "professional" patient. This last sentence may have sounded odd to you, but this was not in the US. This was in a third world country where 40% of the population are under the poverty line, and many can't afford treatment. These patients would come to the hospital regularly, and have dozens of medical students examine them repeatedly, in exchange for some money.

I felt bad for Mr. M, and decided to help him. In a couple of weeks, we were able to find a surgeon who was willing to operate on him for free, and collected enough money to cover the remaining expenses. That day, I felt great. I rushed to the exam room, where he used to stay waiting for his usual examination session, and broke the good news to him, "You will be able to get your surgery done, you won't have to pay anything!" He stared at me with a confused look, and said: "who told you that I want to have surgery! For many years, I wasn't able to find a job. I couldn't provide for my wife and 3 kids. Since I met you, whatever you found inside here \*pointing to his chest\* has been our source of income. For the first time in years, I have a job, and I wouldn't give that up! I want you to make me feel better, but I don't want you to cure me".

I remember having mixed feelings, shock, despair and anger. My attending noticed my reaction and told me: "Always keep an open mind. Remember, we don't treat diseases, we treat people with diseases; and with life stories, goals, and priorities. We treat them so they can live life the way they want, not the way we would want". Now, I live in the U.S.; and even though I rarely see those extreme cases, I still see "people with diseases" every day, and I remember Mr. M, and remind myself to always keep an open mind!

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