

Tanaffos (2007) 6(2), 11-14

©2007 NRITLD, National Research Institute of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, Iran

Hospital Experience: Half-told Stories

Homayun Taba

Freelance Scholar and Writer, Mumbai-India

1. The Mystery of Illness

Our ordeal started in Nov. 2006 when Marguerite began running a high daily temperature, fluctuating from 101 to 103 degrees. We changed several doctors and none could give a diagnosis and instead they treated her for Malaria and 2 other viral infections with heavy doses of antibiotics. This made her body even weaker.

As the illness progressed simple movements turned to drudgery:

"being very ill very weak is a very strange thing.

When it takes all your strength to get from the bedroom to the bathroom and back, it seems like a joke but you don't laugh."

~Charles Bukowski

I was brought up in a doctor's family and my dad could get a second opinion in no time and admission in a hospital was no problem. In our current situation I felt helpless and at the end of my tether as the condition of my wife went from bad to horrible, I remembered Dr.Komal, daughter of Marguerite's friend India.

2. Rare Angels

I called her and gave her a brief account of our situation. She moved fast and got us into the Karuna Hospital, compassion in Sanskrit. Dr. Komal was the first in the line of angels that stepped into our lives. She referred us to Dr. Agera who became our saviour. He himself had had a near- death accident a

couple of years ago and was brought to karuna and healed. Unassuming, frail, experienced and totally dedicated he began a sleuth's job of finding the cause of the disease, which proved to be difficult.

3. Shared Room Agonies

Marguerite was admitted to a twin-sharing room. This hospital encourages attendants to sleep in a comfortable though narrow couch beside the patient. I had decided I had left home with my patient and I will return with her. So for the next 19 days that room became my temporary residence.

It is interesting to see what one can feel from behind a flower printed nylon curtain that divided the two beds. And soon I realized how did the blind navigate the world and perceive it through sounds.

Our first room- mate turned out to be an over eighty lady who produced sounds from every orifice. We had an active Tsunami sound producing equipment, a great asset for the special effects in a film studio. And her snores could best be explained by Bukowski " and some of those snores so deep and gross and unbelievable". Additionally her sweet, gentle husband who could hardly see wanted all the lights on during the night.

Our next neighbour turned out to be another eighty years old lady suffering from back problem. She was a matriarch with robust body, perfect teeth and a steel-like stubbornness. She refused food; she

threw off the belt of the traction device. Her attendant was her grandson with whom they continued conversing at odd hours and when they had exhausted us they would snore harmoniously to each other while we would deal with our resulting grogginess. Why didn't we tell them? We did- but they would forget it soon.

As if being with the geriatric was not the full experience we were meant to have, due to the shortage of the bed in the Gynecology Department they brought in a pregnant lady.

The next day she had a Caesarian and a beautiful boy joined us as an additional roommate. I went to the nurse saying that the baby was so calm and quiet. She told me "Don't be so sure. Wait". Our first night was a series of ten minute intervals where the sound " waaaannggg", or "wang-wang" came to assume a certain meaning to me. We were kept awake the whole night. The next morning I rushed to Sister Eliza and told her we had lived with all types of roommates and all manners of discomfort but if this continued we will have to hold our sickness in abeyance to recover from fresh wounds that were being inflicted upon us. She understood our plight and did her best to get them back to the maternity ward. They were unwilling, I guess the wang-wang of one's own child must be music the parents.

There was also a sweet-smiling woman who shouted nastily things in her sleep and snapped endlessly at her concerned college-going daughter.

The next arrival was, a healthy young mother who had come in for Liposuction. When Sister asked her why had she gone for this, implying was the pain worth the cause, with a tone of disapproval, the answer was "Everyone I know in Canada has done it, and I got fed up of everyone asking me why I hadn't. Which brought out an even more disapproving "Ummm".

Behind the curtain we witnessed the relationships, reviewed equations between couples, heard grumbles

and demands. I thought to myself this must be heaven for a writer who faces a "writer's block".

4. Soft Hands in Iron Gloves

The first day when Sister Eliza walked in and without hesitation put her hand over Marguerites head and prayed in her heavy Malayalam accent. I had no idea that she was going to become so dear to us. I saw this 58 year, short, bespectacled nun in different moods, strict with her staff, very knowledgeable about medical matters, sharp eye for detail and a strong commitment to heal patients. Sister believed and openly stated, "Fifty per cent of any cure is through medicine and the remaining is made possible through prayer". As the days passed and Marguerite's struggle continued she came and put her hand firmly, at times too firmly, squashing her already disheveled hair and prayed for her recovery. We got addicted to this as well as gory stories about violent scenes she had witnessed in riots and if she was busy and did not turn up we longed for it.

As our relationships grew, on more than one occasion she told Marguerite " I do not want you to come here ever again as a patient, though you are welcome to drop in and meet us".

My talk with another senior sister about what made these Kerala women such good nurses. They are in tremendous demand all over the world. In a hospital in New York city after 10 p.m. the spoken language turns Malayalam because the maxim nurses take over for the night shift. She told me that there is indoctrination from early childhood in these mainly Catholic families about service. The second explanation- the Christian ethics imbibed was that whosoever comes to us is to be perceived as Jesus knocking at our door.

Karuna Hospital a strange effect on people. Ones who had been here said that it was really a place of compassion and caring. And the new arrivals caught in the rat race would land up here with their patient and demonstrate a certain manner of " I must get

them before they get me attitude" prevalent out there. For three days I heard complaints in the adjacent room where the three men rather rough looking were arguing and making unusual demands from the nurses. Sister Eliza confronted them in her authoritative way, a language they could relate to. Not being able to twist the system to their benefit they finally left. However, in several other instances the story was different. Soon the sisters through gentleness and compassion as well as firmness would put those agitated people at their ease and provide the best possible care they could. This in turn would bring out in these people their own hidden humanness.

5. Witnessing Helplessly the Deterioration of Your Loved One

Marguerite is a very independent woman, asking does not come easily to her. Hospitals and sickness call for totally different responses. Dependency is the law and its motto: "You will shut up and let us take care of you. And listen to everything you are told". The wheel chair is the first indication of, even if you are perfectly capable of walking, of the need to abide by the rules. The vulnerability and exposure to different people touching, poking and invading your physical personal space is routine. Leading up to a certain objectification that most of us immediately would want to revolt against. I soon came to realize that being a patient requires a new orientation, a kind of resignation and surrender not to the sickness but to the care givers.

Seeing her in her helplessness was not something I have been used to. Her fainting, incoherence and slurry speech disturbed me to no end. Specially indigestible was the fact that she is so clear, and coherent otherwise.

6. Role of Prayer

In a small book entitled Hospital Prayer (compiled by Fr.M.K.Paul ssp St. Pauls 2004), I came across this poem that touched me:

In a long hospitalization

O Lord, it has been a while since I've walked on grass or seen the stars in the sky.

So many silent and restless nights and boring days on a hospital bed!

At first I was too sick to care, but now I am getting impatient to go home. I get upset about my dependency, my setbacks, my slow progress.

But since, O Lord, you have given me enough patience to endure each day, I pray again that you complete your healing process in me.

Let my hope and motivation overcome the times of discouragement and impatience so that I may breathe fresh air and enjoy the atmosphere of my own home.

7. The Intensive Care Unit

As Marguerite retired for the night I began to move around. On the same floor as ours was the intensive care unit. And every night I would see the relatives coming in to spend the night outside while their loved ones struggled for their lives inside the ICU. It was a waiting game and a terrible one at that.

The slow passage of time here was in sharp contrast to the hectic bustle of crowded Mumbai. These were, battling with hope and despair in equal measure- with terror, anguish and desolation as one's companions over sleepless nights.

In India strangers get into conversation very fast, intimate details may be asked and provided without hesitancy. It was unusual to see that each person here was silent and drowned in his/her pain. Each an island, yet their anguish bound them together with a common thread.

Dr. Komal one night invited me inside the ICU. The place was cold, white and silent, barring occasional groans from here and there. On a single computer monitor were the names of 6 or 7 people, lives in struggle, with the state of their bodily systems indicated in continuous flashing numbers.

Whenever the ICU door opened there could be three possibilities, Go and get this drug; Come and see the patient, and last the worst call. So one could

imagine the state of the mind of the half asleep family member waiting outside when the white door flung open.

"Death is one of the laws of nature. But a human being seems to feel small and helpless in front of this law. This is an issue about which nothing can be done. One cannot even battle to eliminate it, it is pointless. It has to be. In another sense it is good too. This is a broad interpretation perhaps stupid sounding as well." Young poetess of Iran Frough Farokhzad had expressed.

Being confronted with "finality" of this kind, can be a big eye opener. At such moments one's "norma" choices seem far from critical and at times even dubious. More so in the light of our daily preoccupations and narrow vision of our priorities. And how keeping such issues of ultimate concern closer to our consciousness can help us live much more meaningful lives.

8. Coming Home

We had left home-as if in the middle of life. The fridge full of vegetables and fruits, other dishes cooked to be consumed in the next day. And all of a sudden we had to run. I thought of the Nazis barging to the homes while the family was in the middle of a meal. It must have been terrible.

We are back home and putting our lives back together. Grateful that we went to the hospital vertical and came back vertical!!

I feel the 19 days stay in the hospital made me a more sensitive person. I also felt I had demonstrated more courage than I had expected of myself. I also had decided to live and struggle with each day as it presented itself. Both nurses and Marguerite's friends pointed to this by saying that many husbands would have buckled in under such circumstances. Someone wanted my mother to give the recipe for making such a "nice boy". These were small consolations in the midst of such a situation!

We used to see the film "The Doctor" with William Hurt several times a year and have

discussions over its de-humanizing message of patient-doctor relationship.

A bunch of people, doctor and junior doctors, crowd around your bed staring at you, perhaps poking and feeling. You are supposed to be silent unless you are asked a question, and at times you are used as the basis for the ritual humiliation of a student. You become a thing, a disease, as the doctors are not interested in anything about you.

Except, of course, the TV doctor-hero who always sees and understands the real person lying there. In the film, the doctor who became patient in his own hospitals and was subjected to the similar treatment give to others, has a wake up call. Becoming a changed person he decides and this we see in the last sequence of the film to let the students dress up in hospital gowns with their backs half exposed and be given some of the initial tests- enemas included.

In Karuna hospital, behind the rules and restrictions, the caring was visible. And doctors we dealt with were approachable, kind and caring.

I had become so used to the environment, my social life improved dramatically, that I was reluctant to leave. After coming home I missed the people, place, the regular routine and the six o'clock wake up call when the all the sheets got changed.

9. Taking Care

The realization comes more strongly than ever that without health everything looks so hollow, so unenjoyable. Last year we had done two sets of workshops with graduate students and these hundred young people were asked a single question "Do you exercise and look after your health", there were only 10 hands raised out of the 100.

Being preoccupied with mystery of human organism and issues of health all my adult life I have found such responses very disconcerting. And have wondered as to how little we know, and how little investment we are willing to make in its upkeep, about our only vehicle that is supposed to make our hopes and dreams come true.