

A day at the walk-in clinic

Fabrizia Faustinella, MD, PhD

Dr. Faustinella (AOA, Baylor College of Medicine, 1997) is Associate Professor of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, in the Department of Family and Community Medicine.

I work in a walk-in clinic located in a county hospital. On the first floor, there is a miniature three-dimensional model of a beautiful harbor with blue water, ships, and cargo trains that go from the port to the surrounding valleys and mountains. The model is inside a big, dusty glass box with a tag that reads: “Welcome to Sunny Side Hospital Safe Haven.” It was a donation from a local family. If you look carefully at the details, you’ll realize that the train is derailed and one of the ships is leaning on its side, sinking into the water. How ironic it is to see something like that at the entrance of a hospital, where so many lives are sinking, derailed by disease. With those thoughts on my mind, I enter the clinic and my day starts.

“If I were on drugs I wouldn’t have cared”

“Doctor, my boyfriend is a drug addict. I am a drug addict, but I’m in a rehab program. I’m 28-years-old. I have no family. I’ve learned a lot in the program. I’ve learned that I’m codependent. If my boyfriend does drugs, I do drugs. I want to be part of the group. I want to be cool, but that’s not cool, doctor. It’s not cool at all, mainly when people have children. I have three children. My children think I’m a super hero, a super mom, but what kind of a mom can I be if I do drugs? I’m hooked on methamphetamines. I’m here because I have a terrible smelly discharge. My boyfriend was diagnosed with chlamydia and gonorrhea and I think I’ve got it too. I had it





Illustrations by Laura Aitken

before and it feels the same. I want to be treated. If I were on drugs, I wouldn't have cared, believe me, I would not have cared about this problem. It's like, so what? I have a smelly discharge. Who cares? But I care now and I want to be treated. If I can smell this mess, people can smell it too. I don't want to be like that anymore. Thank you for helping me. Can I get the medications here in the clinic? I have no money to buy them."

"It's the only pair of shoes I have"

"Doctor, I have a lot of body aches. I hurt everywhere; my back, my shoulders, my buttocks, my hips. I didn't get these pains before, and I'm worried about it. I also got a bad cold about three weeks ago and I can't shake it off. My throat is still sore and I have a cough. I don't think I have a fever. I'm not short of breath. I'm worried that I might have the flu. I was told that people can die if they catch the flu. I'd like to get a flu shot. I know people shouldn't get the flu shot when they are sick, but it'll be impossible for



me to get here again. I have no transportation. I'm homeless. I was wondering if I have these body aches because I sleep on concrete. When I was younger it didn't bother me, but I guess I'm getting older. It's been cold outside. I don't go to the shelter, I sleep outside, under one of the bridges downtown. I don't have blankets anymore, and no sweater, they got stolen when I went to the shelter. That's why I never went back. I was afraid somebody would steal my shoes too. It's the only pair of shoes I have."

"There are too many things going on in my life"

"My legs are very swollen and painful, doctor. I was told that I'm too fat and I need to lose weight. That's why my legs are swollen. Because I'm too fat. But I'm in a lot of pain, and I worry about having a clot in my legs. Can you help me? I know I'm very anxious, and I'm very depressed. I see a psychiatrist, and I'm a little better now, but there are too many things going on in my life. My mom died two months ago, my husband is in jail—He was found with cocaine in his pockets. But I don't use that stuff. I have to take care of

my children. One of my children is disabled; the other one has juvenile diabetes. We have no insurance. I eat because I'm nervous. I get up at night and I can't stop eating."

"He was diagnosed with adenocarcinoma of the maxillary sinuses"

"Dr. F, he has a lot of pain in his face, and terrible headaches. They sent him home from the hospital. He lives in a trailer with his brother who is mentally ill. They both need a lot of help, but there are no parents, only some aunts and uncles who live far way. He was admitted to the hospital for a bad sinus infection, and was diagnosed with adenocarcinoma of the maxillary sinuses. A terrible case. No insurance. He was asked to apply for Medicaid, but it'll take a while. What do you want to do, Dr. F? They don't want us to prescribe narcotics at all. Should we call the social worker?"

"I think I have cancer"

"Good morning Sir, I'm Dr. F. I was asked to see you because you have lost a lot of weight and your psychiatrist is concerned that you might have cancer. They told me that you have some speech difficulty. I have an accent, so I'll talk slowly, and as clearly as I can, and, please, you do the same. Do you have any difficulty swallowing? Nausea or vomiting? Abdominal pain? Any fever, chills, swollen glands, unusual headaches, chest pains, heat intolerance, tremor, nervousness? Okay. So, you feel fine, no aches and pains, and you can eat, but you're still losing weight. Please, tell me what you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a normal day. Lets' start with breakfast."

"Nothing? What about lunch? A piece of bread? And dinner? Nothing? Say that again. I'm sorry, I can't understand you well. Say that again. You're saying that you can't get to the grocery store. Is that right? So, don't you have any family member or neighbors that could take you grocery shopping occasionally? No, I see. Where do you live? I'm going to repeat it, what you said. Please, nod if I got it right."



You're saying that you live in a shack, with no heating and no electricity. Where do you get food? Did you say from the trash containers in the park? When you are strong enough to walk all the way to the park? So you get what you can and then you go back home. Did I understand well? I see. You're happy here because here you can eat three meals and have snacks, bananas and a bed and heat. Oh! In jail too you got regular meals, but they beat you up and you want to stay away from that place. Sir, I really don't think you have cancer. Don't worry about that. I'll talk to the social worker and see what we can do to help you out. Dr. F., we can't do anything about it. We could send him to a shelter, if he accepts to go, otherwise we can't do anything about it."

"I'm only 22 years old"

"Dr. F., are you sure there is nothing more that can be done for me? How can that be? I'm only 22 years old.

What's going to happen now?

Will I die? How's that possible? I haven't done

anything wrong. I

want to be a ballerina.

I am a ballerina.

I've been training hard for

it and then all this

happened. I was dancing

one day and I noticed

that something was off. I

couldn't move my leg properly and couldn't get through my choreography without stumbling. Then it got worse. I can't walk anymore, and my head hurts all the time. The pain medications are not helping. They said the cancer has spread everywhere. How can that be? Can you do something for me? I have no insurance."

to walk all the way to this hospital. It's hot out there."

"When you went to the ER last night, did you tell them you needed help?"

"No, I went to the ER because I needed a place to spend the night. I slept on a chair in the waiting room, but I said nothing."

"I'm sorry this is happening to you. I can take you down to the ER again.

They have a social worker on call 24 hours a day. Since, you were seen there last night, we could ask to talk to the social worker and see if she can find a shelter for you to go to."

"Thank you. I would appreciate that."

"There is only one social worker, and she's swamped, so you might have to wait a while before she gets to you."

"I have nowhere to go. I'll wait. I need all the help I can get."

"It ain't easy"

Early one morning, while sitting at the traffic light, the very last one, right next to the garage where I park for work, I saw a man in a wheelchair trying to negotiate the bumpy sidewalk of the county hospital. He was using his hands to push the wheels and was carrying a plastic bag in his mouth. I couldn't see the contents of the bag, but it looked like there were clothes in it, along with other things. I thought about how hard it must be to carry that weight around in his mouth, and my heart ached. I knew life hadn't been generous with him.

Later that day, I met the man as one of my patients in the clinic.

"I saw you earlier and felt bad about how you were struggling to get here."

"All of my possessions are in the bag, and I don't want to hang it on the back of the wheelchair, because I live on the streets and am afraid somebody will steal it. I can't put



it on my lap because while using my hands to roll the chair it falls to the ground, and I can't pick it up. I can't afford to lose this bag, doctor, this is all I have and if somebody takes it I can't run behind them and get it back. I have bad teeth, though, so it really hurts. That's why I came in. I need something for pain. My teeth are loose and cracked. I can't chew food anymore. Can you help me with that?"

How do you manage out there, being homeless and in a wheelchair?"

"It ain't easy."

"I'll ask the nurse if the social worker can see you and help you out."

"Dr. F, the social worker sees only the patients who are in the hospital or down in the ER. He will have to get to a homeless shelter. All we can do is to give him a list of shelters."

"How is he going to get there? He has no transportation and he's in a wheelchair?"

"Dr. F, unless you want to give him a ride, there is nothing we can do here."

An inescapable network of mutuality

When my shift ended, later than usual that night, around 9 p.m., I collected my bags and walked to the parking garage. I took the stairs to the 8th floor in a final effort to gather a few more steps before going home. When I got to the parking ramp, I placed one of my bags in my mouth and tried to carry it like that all the way to the car. My mouth—filled with healthy, strong teeth—couldn't handle the load. Saliva started coming out of the corners of my mouth, and my jaw got tired almost immediately. I couldn't find a good position for my tongue. I had to cough and the bag fell out of my mouth and landed on my feet.

I thought of my patient, of his trials and tribulations, as I was driving to the comfort of my home. I thought of his strength, the inner strength he must have had to survive and go through life every day like that, hanging on to it, precariously, as the bag in his mouth.

When finally I arrived home, I felt exhausted—not physically, but mentally. I saw so many homeless people—people with very little, or no resources at all. I saw racial and ethnic minorities, indigent and low income families with no roof over their heads. People who had been evicted, not once but many times, and lost all they had. These are people who don't eat every day, or eat out of the garbage containers in downtown or in the parks. If they get lucky, they can get a meal at a local church or shelter.

They're all facing insurmountable challenges: homelessness, poverty, lack of education, the scourge of mental illness, poor physical health, and the shortcomings of our health care system.

I felt overwhelmed by the intricacy and the enormity of the problem. To make changes it takes resources, but, most of all, it takes will, determination, and a fundamental change in the philosophy of life, the most difficult to achieve.

A wealthy ranch owner once told me that health care is a privilege and not a right. "Health care is like a TV set," he said, "If you have the money, you buy it, if you don't, you have to do without it." Should this be the philosophy by which a civilized society lives and operates? Should this self-centered approach to life dictate our health care policies? Should this lack of empathy and inability to relate to people in a humane fashion guide our actions?

I started feeling somewhat discouraged and I sank into the couch. I reached for a book of inspiring quotes that I keep on the coffee table and opened it. I laid my eyes on the words of Dr. Martin Luther King:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.¹

That's truly the way it is, and what it comes down to: when we deny people food, shelter, education, and health care the resulting damage inflicted upon those members of our society will eventually have negative repercussions on all of us. Shouldn't we all work together toward achieving a more fair society, and a better health care system, if not out of empathy, out of the need to save ourselves?

My mind kept on churning, busy, crowded with thoughts, trying to find the answers that could save my patients, until my eyes became too heavy, and I finally fell asleep.

References

1. King, Martin Luther Jr. "Letter From Birmingham Jail." *Liberation* 8:4 (June) 1963.

The author's address is:

3718 South MacGregor Way

Houston, TX 77021

E-mail: Fab7Faust@gmail.com.