

When compassion met Ed in the clinic

Vivid in my memory is Mr. S., whom we came to know simply as Ed.

An irregular heartbeat brought him to the emergency department after decades without seeing a physician. He was a man in his sixties whose life had been ravaged by alcohol. Homeless, he lived in a trap house with a bunch of youngsters. The years had etched deep lines into his face. He appeared disheveled, weary, and defeated.

Ed needed far more than medications.

He needed a physician who saw him as a human being beyond his diseases.

During his emergency department visit, he was diagnosed with diabetes and prescribed insulin. His hemoglobin A1c was greater than 9%. But where does a homeless man store insulin? His only option was the borrowed icebox in a basement. The team prescribed a GLP-1 receptor agonist instead. Unfortunately, the medication troubled his insides, and Ed made it abundantly clear that he would never take it again!

We recognized that the work ahead would be challenging on multiple fronts.

Over the next six months our resident rallied the care team. Resident, attending physician, care team walked alongside Ed, together; secured stable housing; his hemoglobin A1c decreased to 7.7%. He stopped drinking and regained hope and dignity.

Preventive care, once unimaginable, became possible. Ed allowed an ophthalmologist to look deep into his eyes, and he trusted a gastroenterologist to examine his colon in its entirety. These were more than completed screenings; they were milestones of trust. For someone who had been disconnected from the healthcare system for decades, they represented remarkable victories.

The ancient physician Hippocrates observed that some patients, though conscious that their condition is perilous, get better simply through their contentment with the goodness of their doctor.

Whether or not these are his exact words, they perfectly capture what I witnessed in the resident clinic at GBMC.

During Ed's most recent visit, I watched the interaction between him and his resident physician. Their conversation was filled with mutual respect, trust, and warmth. As I observed them together, I found myself thinking that every medical student and resident should witness what I had just seen. It was a masterclass in compassion and patient-centered medicine.

Residency teaches us how to diagnose disease, interpret laboratory values, and prescribe evidence-based therapies. I believe some of our greatest lessons often come from our patients. Ed reminded us that healing begins by seeing the patient as a person before the diagnoses. His greatest medicine was not the prescriptions he received. Rather, it was a physician who met him with compassion, understood the barriers he faced, and never stopped believing he deserved better.

That day, when compassion met Ed in the clinic, healing followed. Ed reminded all of us why we chose medicine in the first place.

Thank you, Dr. Navami Guru, MD.

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