



I'm Here to Learn

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The sharp, staccato beeps shock me sharply from the hazy semi-sleep I typically entered during these nights.

Call.

I quickly reached for the sound, desperate to silence it and keep it from reaching my family's ears. As I did so, I could feel the familiar rush of cortisol already beginning to make my heart beat a little faster, fanning my anxiety about what awaited me.

A patient in the emergency room?

An unstable patient on the floor?

A critical lab value?

A child at home with a fever?

How quickly my mind flashed through the possibilities!

I pressed a few buttons in my bleary-eyed state until I reached the right one and the message flashed.

"Heart rate in the 30s."

My own heart rate increased a little more as I rapidly dialed the call-back number with one hand while pulling on my scrubs with the other. I ensured the patient was stable, asked for an EKG and got in my car to see him for myself. As I drove, I couldn't help but wish my mind would come up with answers as quickly as it came up with questions—a thought I've had at least a million times since starting residency. It's 1 am, but shouldn't my brain know I'm a resident? That I need it to function a little faster right now?

No.

Not faster.

More skillfully.

And I was once again reminded of the mantra I'd chosen for this phase of life called residency. The phrase that has been pulling me up and through this process: "I'm not here to be brilliant. I'm here to learn, to take care of patients, and to be a part of a team." It just so happened that right then, I had the charge of all three.

I'm not here to be brilliant.

As I arrived on the floor, I found the nurse and was handed an EKG. I found myself craving the certainty of a test question: a few choices—one certainly correct and several incorrect, and the satisfaction of definitively knowing the answer or crossing off the incorrect choices. However, this was real life with a real human and a real heart that was beating just a few times too slow over the past minute. Instead of five choices, I quickly compiled at least 20. Which one to choose?

I'm here to learn.

I craved the knowledge of a fellowship-trained, widely and deeply experienced attending in cardiology. Surely that physician would know what to do with a slow heart in the middle of night. I envisioned a physician confidently striding into the hospital and calmly evaluating the patient, competently voicing orders to an attentive support staff audience. Instead, I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass of one of those ubiquitous hospital reprint

paintings: wrinkled cerulean blue scrubs, glasses that I wore on call to hide the bags under my eyes. The seasoned nurse turned to her charting, totally unflappable.

I'm here to take care of patients and to be a part of a team.

What if I make a mistake? What if he comes to harm, and I miss something obvious, and it's all my fault? It's my responsibility to take care of him and this slow heart... and, I quickly realized, the nurse, the attending, the support staff: we were all, in our own way, responsible for this patient and his heart. I wasn't taking care of him. *We* were taking care of him.

At the reminder of the mantra, I felt the breath I didn't know I'd been holding release—a reminder to take another fuller, deeper, breath. My fears being addressed one by one. Another inhale, another exhale and I could feel the gears turning, the breath like oil for my tired brain. The dust began to fall from my memories and a coherent assessment began to form. The patient had received a higher dose of a beta-blocker medication, but was otherwise stable, asymptomatic, and without changes on his EKG. The nurse agreed to make sure the pacer pads were nearby (at my insistence and her amusement).

From the Cleveland Clinic, Family Medicine Residency Program, Lakewood, OH.

I called the attending with a brief update. To my relief, she agreed with my assessment and plan. I collapsed on the call room futon, wincing a little as my back hit the frame where the stuffing had grown thin. As I stared at the fluorescent lights, I felt humbled, and far from brilliant, by the experience of the past hour.

I'm not here to be brilliant.

I'm here to learn,

To take care of patients,

To be a part of team.

The weight of each phrase sank in a little deeper as I lived the experience they spoke of. A few hours later, I handed off the pager and went home to brush my teeth, find breakfast, and get dressed for a morning of clinic, feeling maybe just a little bit wiser.

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