

My Family Doctor: A Legacy Through One Patient's Life

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One evening after a long workday, grateful, yet carrying a heavy heart, I reflected on a patient relationship that has shaped my career the most. I remember my first encounter with Mrs Parks: a confident, sharp, and spirited 72-year-old African American woman. I stepped into the exam room as an intern; coat slightly wrinkled, unsure if my stethoscope was even on right. Alternatively, Mrs Parks sat straight, arms crossed, a raised brow waiting for me. Her eyes narrowed, then softened as she said, "I've never trusted anyone with my health before, but I'm giving this a shot."

That moment cracked something open in both of us. Her directness matched my eagerness to learn, and her trust in me despite my inexperience left a lasting impression. A new relationship began that spanned decades and changed us both. Mrs Parks was more than a patient: She was a reminder of what continuity of care truly means.

Our appointments over time were a mix of emotions: starting with a bit of trepidation, evolving into comfort, and often ending in shared laughter. I remember her coming in for a visit worried about her blood pressure but leaving joking that I was the one who needed to slow down. What began as routine check-ins became something deeper. My role changed from a resident to an attending, but to Mrs Parks, I was always a constant "Her Doc." We navigated care through countless transitions: from independence to gradual decline, from clinic visits to hospitalizations, and eventually, to home-based care with a few constants: mutual trust, respect, and honesty.

Her stories brought her life into sharper focus.

"I know what fear and hunger are," she once told me. "My husband taught me both, but my children gave me the strength to change for me and them."

She was a single Black woman who endured injustice, eviction, abuse, and raised two daughters with fierce love and purpose. One story that struck me deeply was the night she escaped her abusive husband, carrying her girls through the dark to shelter with a trucking company family. Not long after, she convinced the owner to let her drive. That job became her path forward. Her life was a testament to grit, discipline, and grace under pressure. Her stories reshaped not only how I saw her but how I understood my role as her physician.

She was also the one who, in her own quiet way, helped me share my story and pain. She made space for me even when she was unwell.

"How are *you*, Doc?" she once said, her eyes searching mine. "I know you're my doctor but share your pain with me."

It was my mother's death anniversary. Her question broke through my carefully held composure. I let her see my sorrow.

She listened and said gently, "You've got to feel it to heal it."

In that moment, the roles blurred. She taught me that healing flows both ways. She showed me that vulnerability strengthens and deepens the physician-patient bond.

Her stories and her relationship with her family shaped our health care decisions. When she was diagnosed with early-stage heart failure, she worried about feeling groggy.

"I still pick up my grandkids," she said.

Staying clear-headed mattered most, so we adjusted the plan. We started medications at lower doses, checked in often, and modified as needed. It wasn't textbook medicine, but it was right for her. Before "shared decision-making" became a buzzword, Mrs Parks showed me what it truly meant to listen, understand the *why*, and decide together.

Through our clinical encounters and shared stories, I began to understand what Mrs Parks called "hidden healing." At first, I didn't fully grasp it. Over time, I learned that

healing isn't always about curing; it's about witnessing, validating, and simply being present: a jewel of wisdom that I inherited from my time with Mrs Parks.

I never truly understood the weight of the phrase she often used—"my family doctor"—until the day I held her hand as she lay peacefully in her home, making her final transition from life to soul. The room smelled of lavender. Her breath was light, uneven, and her once-strong fingers lay still in mine.

"I want to make it to 100, only if I can laugh and have fun," she once said during one of her earlier visits.

We had honest and clear conversations about her end-of-life wishes early and often with her family at the table. Because of that clarity, we all knew what she wanted when the time came.

"Do what I want for me," she used to say. "Always respect my decision and never forget, I am the patient."

As she rested peacefully, I realized how profound those conversations had been, and it didn't make the moment easier, but it made the decision clearer. These discussions and decisions weren't just about logistics or paperwork; they were her way of staying in control, even at the end. She had lived on her terms and she left on them, too. I finally understood what it meant to be "Her Doc."

As my journey with Mrs Parks comes to a close, I carry her lessons forward. She taught me compassion, cultural humility, openness, and empathy. As the demands of paperwork, administrative tasks, and system pressures grow, they can chip away at the joy that brought us to this field. Meaningful patient relationships continue to show me that healing goes beyond medicine; and every time I sit with a patient, listen to their story, and care for them as a whole person, I find my way back. To stay grounded in this work, I choose to hold onto those moments. They remind me why medicine still matters and why I do too! These connections fuel my passion to serve not just as a physician, but as someone who bears witness to humanity.