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Family Medicine

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Author's Response to "When You Forget to Pack the Yogurt"

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TO THE EDITOR:

I appreciate Dr Popokh's thoughtful response to my narrative.[1,2] I agree that words, images, and memorabilia can remind us of our purpose in medicine and sustain us when our reserves are running low. The timing of this response was meaningful because a recent encounter reminded me of one more source we sometimes overlook.

Not long ago, I found myself working through lunch again. This time, however, I had forgotten to replenish my emergency snack.

I was caring for a frustrated patient. Despite our efforts over the last 8 months and the involvement of multiple specialists, we still didn't have answers. I didn't know what else to offer, but I desperately wanted to solve her problem. Instead of looking for more solutions, I sat in my office with the uncomfortable feeling that I had failed my patient.

I wasn't sure an award, photograph, quotation, or reminder of a past accomplishment could have convinced me otherwise.

Then a colleague appeared at my office door.

"How are you doing?" they asked.

I told them what had happened. They listened and then reminded me of something I could not remind myself of at that moment: I was a good doctor. My colleague explained that, even though I couldn't find the cause of my patient's symptoms, my patient kept showing up because they recognized my effort and understood that I still cared.

"Your patient still trusts you. If they didn't, why would they keep coming back?"

I did not know whether my colleague was right, but that brief conversation encouraged me and refueled my hope.

My colleague's words reminded me that one of our most important sources of sustenance in medicine is our colleagues.

Throughout my time as a physician and faculty member, some of the moments that have sustained me most have been ordinary conversations at an office doorway. A colleague stops by because I need reassurance. On another day, I stand at their door because they need someone to remind them of who they are and the good they have done.

Our colleagues understand in a way that others sometimes cannot because they have been there, too. They know the uncertainty of caring for a patient when there is no clear answer. They know what it feels like to question their own abilities. They also know how much a few words from someone who understands can matter.

Medicine and the health systems in which we practice will continue to change around us, often beyond our control. Yet through those changes, we continue to sustain one another.

Words, images, memorabilia, and, yes, an emergency cup of yogurt can all replenish us. But there are moments when we cannot remind ourselves of our purpose, our worth, or the difference we have made. In those moments, we may need someone else to remind us.

Perhaps one of our greatest sources of fuel has been beside us all along: each other.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USE DISCLOSURE

I used Grammarly to check for typos and grammatical mistakes. I also used Grammarly to identify sentences I could shorten to meet the journal's word count requirement.

REFERENCES

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