

I Attended My Patient's Funeral, and That Is Family Medicine

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My longtime patient Cora died last month. She was 97. Her family invited me to her funeral. It was an honor to be asked. In fact, it was a highlight of my career as a family physician. There is no truer marker of relationship, continuity, comprehensiveness, and compassionate care. No quality measure holds a candle to being invited to your patient's funeral.^{1,2}

I was a resident when I first met Cora; she was already in her 70s. She had already had many doctors, specialists, and consultants, and endured hospitalizations, operations, cancer. Her paper chart was volumes.

It seemed at the time an impossible task to take care of this complex patient in brief office visits. But she kept coming back. And the visits were usually long. I remember sitting, listening, talking. But I also often found myself searching for a medical task: should I refill a med? Is she due for some screening? Am I missing something?

I learned about her and I got to know her extended family, her children, and her grandchildren. Over the ensuing years, we kept each other's care and company in different practices and different settings, and through more hospitalizations, more diagnoses, and more specialists. I remember during one hospital stay, I came by to visit, sitting on her bed. The residents could hardly imagine coming in when not on duty, let alone having a patient for that many years.

When it became clear that she deserved a family doctor closer to home, I referred her to a trusted colleague; but we remained in touch. I would still get phone calls and we would catch up and share about the family.

Now, after more than 20 years of practice, I have come to appreciate the value of healing relationships over time. Not episodes of care, or hospitalizations, but years and decades of meaningful presence and care. It is more than continuity; it is longevity. It is a depth of human relationship, of family, of caring, and of love, that sometimes can only unfold over a period of many years.

I deeply appreciate Cora, who like all patients, was also a teacher. A teacher of countless medical students, nurses, physicians, and me. We learned on her; we learned from her.

And finally, in her death, she continues to teach us all to appreciate and treasure the gift of our patients, and the gift of presence over time.

Cora was my longest tenured teacher, and I thank her for teaching me what it means to be a family doctor.

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