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NON-FICTION | SPRING 2023

Mea Culpa

By Ron Lands

It was a late afternoon in May. I was in my hematology clinic, my retirement job that some days emphasizes what an oxymoron those words are. I had seen my last patient of the day, last appointment of the week, last barrier between me and a four-day weekend, most of which I hoped to spend on the lake.

My patient was an elderly man referred from a community clinic. He wore an eclectic ensemble, a straw fedora-shaped hat, a loose-fitting, wrinkled tropics-styled shirt, and thick brown wool pants with cuffs. He sat with his left leg across his right, hands folded on his thigh.

I'd spent 30 minutes teaching him about myeloproliferative disorders. Usually, there was an internal medicine resident with me, and while I always directed my discussion to the patient, the information was aimed mainly at them. This was one of my favorite mini-lectures, and since there was no resident, he had my full attention.

I smoothed the paper cover on the exam table and used it as a whiteboard. I drew a diagram depicting the maturation of erythrocytes, leukocytes, and platelets from a bone marrow stem cell. Then I described how mutations in that pathway contributed to the similarities and differences of polycythemia, thrombocythemia, myelofibrosis, and chronic myelogenous leukemia. I paused to savor the taste of those polysyllabic words as they rolled around in my mouth. I finished by correlating the molecular probes I would order to dissect his blood problem into a precise diagnosis. I recounted the history of the Philadelphia Chromosome to provide a historical perspective of the breathtaking changes in hematology that I'd witnessed in the four decades of my career.

He smiled, nodded, and appeared to be appropriately appreciative.

I asked if he had questions.

"No," he said. "I reckon not."

I missed the tone of quiet resignation in his voice.

I gave him a stack of handouts to review, encouraged him to read them and bring back his questions at his next visit. I walked him to the checkout desk to make his appointments.

A week later, I noticed his name at the end of my clinic list. Sometimes the schedulers sense something that I don't and know that some people need a more open-ended visit or, more often, aren't likely to show up. They schedule accordingly.

His appointment time came and went. I looked through the computer and found that he hadn't kept his date for the bone marrow biopsy or the abdominal ultrasound that I requested. I reviewed the results of the blood work I sent from his first clinic visit. Most of it was back. Some of it was abnormal.

I brimmed with righteous indignation at this ungrateful man, for whom I had scheduled a quick return so I could deal with his problem expeditiously. Not only did he leave a gap in my schedule, but the ripple effect was also unforgivable. There were plenty of other patients who needed that appointment and would have kept it. I flagged his visit, sent a message to my nurse to find him, give him one more chance and reschedule everything. I told her to double book him somewhere at the end of my day as soon as possible.

By the third week, he had missed his second appointment with the radiology department. They declined to reschedule him. Later that week, he missed his second one with me. The gap in my schedule allowed me to finish with a few minutes left to take a walk. I meandered through the hospital, past the gift shop, the wannabe Starbucks, the waiting area, past the glass windows overlooking a man parked outside in a wheelchair with an IV bag hanging empty. I moved outside, down the sidewalk to the parking garage, took the stairs down to the bottom level, then rode the elevator up to the first floor again. As I exited, the sliding doors of the elevator adjacent to mine opened, and my missing patient stepped out.

Though my memory of him that first clinic day is quite clear and detailed, I didn't recognize him until he said, "Is this you?" He handed me a card with my name and the practice logo printed on the top and a handwritten follow-up appointment time, now three weeks overdue.

"I reckon," filtered into the backwaters of my consciousness. "Yeah," I said. "Come with me. I'm on my way there now."

He wore the same outfit that he wore on his first visit, the same summer shirt with wool pants. His hat didn't appear to have moved since I first saw him. While we walked, he told me how anxious he gets around doctors. He said that sometimes his brain just quits working, and he can't answer questions. He'd even passed out in another office. That prompted an emergency room visit, something he especially wanted to avoid in the future.

We walked across the glass-enclosed bridge that connects the building where we were to the one where we were headed. "UNIVERSITY CANCER INSTITUTE" was emblazoned high on the outside wall.

"Almost there," I said. "That's where we're going."

He nodded.

"Does it scare you?"

"Does what scare me?"

"Coming to a cancer clinic." I pointed at the sign.

He was quiet for a few steps. "You a cancer doctor?"

I told him that I was.

"I reckon it does," he said.

I left him at the check-in desk, then went to my computer and opened his medical record. I scrolled through my original note, reviewed his lab again, and reread the message I'd sent my nurse after his first missed appointment. The much-fabled cartoon lightbulb of realization started to flicker in my brain.

The missed appointments, the card that he had me read with my name on it, his inability to recognize the sign on the outside of the Cancer Institute all came clearly into focus like a blood smear viewed through the high-power lens on my microscope. I blushed, remembering my pedantic lecture about malignant hematology.

My medical assistant had seated him in an exam room to wait for me. I entered, closed the door behind me, and sat down.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Let's start over."

Ron Lands recently retired from UT Medical Center, Knoxville, Tennessee as a hematologist. He is an MFA alumnus of Queens University of Charlotte. He practiced medicine for many years in East Tennessee where he grew up. He was privileged to treat strangers, lifelong friends and a few relatives. His writing is about those experiences. Find more of his work at For Lands Sake.