How are you doing?” I cautiously asked.

“Pretty bad,” he sarcastically answered. “How would you be doing if your body was full of cancer and your doctors told you there was nothing they could do?”

It was a typical answer from him and I immediately regretted asking the question. “Is that really what your oncologist told you?” I asked.

“I don’t have to tell you how doctors are,” he angrily continued. “Of course he used big words and acted like the stupid treatments are helping. But look at me. He must think I’m an idiot. Do I look like someone who is getting better? At the end of every visit he reminds me that I have a very serious condition and he can’t cure me. He told me I should get my affairs in order. Does that answer your question: ‘How am I doing?’ ”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Well, thanks, he replied, shrugging off my pity. “A lot of good it does me.”

Long before his cancer, he had been a difficult patient. He was a 53-year-old accountant who suffered from diabetes and high blood pressure. Regrettably, we were doing a poor job controlling his diseases. He was supposed to see me every three months. Four, five, and six months would pass and he would not return. Finally, I would tell him that this was the last time I would refill his medicine unless he got his lab tests and came in for a visit. Three or four months later I would see him. His blood pressure and blood sugar would be off the wall. He would react angrily at his test results. It was my fault. I had refused to treat him.

The cancer came as a bit of a shock. At one visit his liver enzymes were elevated. He had not been feeling well. An ultrasound revealed his liver to be full of tumors that had spread from a previously unknown colon cancer. He was quite advanced when it was discovered. Despite chemotherapy that had slowed its growth, his abdomen was now distended with fluid and his skin was becoming jaundiced.

“You seem very angry,” I said.

“Wouldn’t you be?” he snapped back at me.

I struggled to find a suitable response. “Would you like me to try to help you with your anger and your depressed feelings?” I asked.

“Well I think I need something,” he answered as his voice softened.

As I talked to him, I noticed his mood change. I had always treated him appropriately as a doctor, but the harsh way he treated me had prevented me from feeling true compassion towards him as a person. But as he opened up to me that day, I felt a closer bond to him. We talked for a long time and I prescribed an antidepressant medication for him.

As we shook hands at the end of the visit, he held onto my hand for a long time as if holding on for his life. Despite my firm grip, I knew that I could not save his life. I felt great sadness as I released his hand and said goodbye.

He was to follow up with me in one month. I had hoped that the medication had helped him. I believed that our talk had. I had anxiously anticipated his visit and was deeply disappointed when he did not show up. Two days later, I opened the newspaper and discovered why.

Sometimes a patient’s treatment can be measured by lab tests or x-rays. Sometimes you can personally discuss their response in a follow-up visit. But sometimes you just read a name in the obituaries and you wonder if you made any difference at all.

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