Little Acts and Big Differences
Perspectives on Civility in Medicine

“Living the dream.” This phrase is often uttered by health care workers, sometimes with true contentment and sometimes with disdain. Every job has good days and bad days. When children picture their future dream job, they often imagine an idealized, romanticized version of what the good days will look like. Even medical students, older and more mature, fantasize about a future of triumphantly returning home from the hospital each evening, proud of all the patients helped that day.

Of course, the actual reality of daily life as a surgical resident promptly dismantled this glorified view: tasks that piled up as boxes to be checked, a constant struggle to keep up with new consults, discharge summaries that required completion, and the continued concerns about self-doubt. In between these challenges, it is still easy to find immense happiness from the instances dreamed up and romanticized since medical school: moments of truly connecting with a patient, successfully completing a difficult surgery, or the rare, but coveted, day when the patient shares their gratitude for your work. However, there is another source of joy that is unanticipated but has important meaning—the small moments of kindness and encouragement shared among health care workers from various parts of an interdisciplinary team. This may include everyone working together in the hospital to care for patients: social workers, nurses, dietitians, residents, attending physicians, and countless more. Those little connections occur unexpectedly and serve as reminders that we are all on the same team: a look of appreciation, the willingness to pause and discuss a concern, the words of validation after a long shift...suggest that we are in this together and share a common humanity.

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into negativity that is not constructive but rather disparaging and unhelpful. Disagreeing with a treatment plan is expected as part of the practice of medicine but storming off in a rude manner is not helpful. Reviewing a negative outcome with an entire multidisciplinary team could be productive but accusing someone of being unintelligent and uneducated is degrading and unnecessary. Add onto these expected critiques the display by any interdisciplinary colleague of small instances of disregard and disrespect for each other’s time, concern, or even intelligence, and a day can become particularly stressful and damaging.

From our own personal experiences in the specific world of surgery, toughness is encouraged and the line between self-assurance and outright rudeness can be blurred. In this environment, disagreements can be misconstrued as a threat to a person’s authority rather than the disclosure of a different point of view. Requests and questions and concerns can all be seen as annoying inconveniences rather than imperative pillars in the construct of teamwork. When the expected disagreements that occur in the course of performing a job are misconstrued as incivilities, the result can be a shift to simply being uncivil and not making an effort to maintain that all conversations remain respectful and polite.

All members of a health care team, made up of multidisciplinary contributors, have the same ultimate goal: to help others and improve the lives of patients. No one walks into the hospital and plans to do harm or provide poor care. Because health care workers approach this goal from various perspectives, however, there are bound to be misunderstandings, conflicts, and disagreements. Although disagreements in the hospital environment are inevitable, they do not have to be condescending or disrespectful. Making an effort to ensure civility and mutual respect can go a long way: courteous and supportive communication between team members can boost the production of the individual as well as the entire team.

There are countless examples of times when small gestures of acknowledgement and encouragement are what got us through a difficult day: a smile from a tired nurse who is thankful for a quick response or a text from a colleague telling us to enjoy a well-deserved day off.

When we were in medical school, we never daydreamed that a nurse remembering our name or an attending physician from another service listening respectfully to our concerns would be the catalysts that made for a positive day. We never expected these to be the moments that brought unexpected joy, and we did not learn how to do this for others. But these are the moments that connect us to our collective humanity. In a hospital setting mired in fatigue and surrounded by illness, it is not always the satisfaction of a life-saving surgery but sometimes a small act of kindness that makes a big difference. Health care team members should remember to treat each other with respect, civility, and encouragement so that each one can truly “Live the dream.”

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