

THE WOLF OF MEDICINE

“Regarding your disease, what are you afraid of?”

There was a pause.

Out of the half a dozen doctors I had previously seen, nobody had ever asked me.

Everyone has a story. The title and characters may be different, but the plot oftentimes takes us on a wild adventure that fosters personal growth and new understanding. For the healthcare provider, much of our learning and understanding comes externally from our patients. But when the mirror is reflected back on ourselves, a personal account challenges us to view disease and sickness in a new light. In this short excerpt, I hope to chronicle my own account and how it has challenged me to become a better physician.

Chapter 1: The Diagnosis

I remember the final weeks of my senior year in high school, marking the days off on my calendar before leaving for college. It marked a defining time in my life to grow up and become my own person. But as I was entering what was to be the greatest four years of my life and the peak of my adolescence, I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. It was unexpected news and devastating to say the least. I sat there with thoughts of uncertainty, wondering how my life might change. As a college student, I was supposed to be an adult now; adults are supposed to be strong. But as I reached the limits of my containment, I sat there in the doctor’s office and broke down into tears.

Chapter 2: The Decline

Aside from handling the pressures of a new city, new classes, and an entirely new living dynamic, I was beginning a battle with my health. I always felt drained and tired. Food became the enemy, and I began losing weight. While my doctors had me experimenting with new medications and treatments, I felt my health deteriorating. Crohn’s is not the type of disease that people like to talk about. So, for the longest time that is exactly what I did. I packed my bags for college, medications on hand, hugged my parents, and left for college, not to speak about Crohn’s disease to any roommates, colleagues, or friends that I would meet.

As this chronic disease is not yet well understood, I was left with many more questions than answers. Why me? Why now? Life was so unfair. Skipping classes for doctor’s appointments or expensive imaging studies became routine. My cellphone became a tool for battling insurance companies, trying to push through prior authorizations or get imaging studies or medications approved. Healthcare felt like an insurmountable obstacle that I was left to overcome, and I felt entirely alone. Navigating the complexity and enormity of healthcare became the wolf in my story.

Chapter 3: High Hopes

After being bounced around from doctor to doctor, I was referred to a gastroenterologist in a faraway land called Gainesville. I remember sitting there in the overcrowded waiting room anxiously waiting for my name to be called. My foot was tapping restlessly. I recall sarcastically thinking to myself that I should grab a number, as if being served at a deli. Finally I was called back. There was a knock on the door and a short, stocky woman in a white coat walked in, buried behind thick-rimmed glasses. I rolled my eyes, ready for another lecture about Crohn's.

After a brief introduction and review of my chart she asked, "Regarding your disease, what are you afraid of?" There was a pause. Out of the half a dozen doctors I had previously seen, nobody had ever asked me. "Well...I guess I'm afraid of the unknown," I murmured, "I don't know anyone else going through this, what to expect, or how it will change my life." She rolled her chair over from behind the computer and parked it right in front of me and put her hand on my shoulder, proceeding to tell me that I was not alone. She connected me with the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America, an organization of thousands of people just like me, and for the first time I felt a sense of community. It was a simple gesture and demonstration of humanism that has stuck with me to this day.

For the first time I felt that I was not lost in the vast sea of healthcare, viewed merely as a number, or a quota, but rather as a person. In the big business of healthcare, it is all too easy to become consumed in efficiency and profits. But healthcare is not every other industry. Patients are not interchangeable products on an assembly line. That simple interaction immersed me in Crohn's disease and medicine. I wanted to learn everything about it and maybe even provide some relief for others going through something similar. A year later, I sent in my applications to medical school.

Chapter 4: The Outlook

As a student at the Florida State University College of Medicine,



"PEACE, BROTHER WOLF"

Daniel Bernabe, MD

Dr. Bernabe graduated from the Florida State University College of Medicine in 2016. He is currently a resident in the Family Medicine Residency Program at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare.

it is a humbling feeling to stand behind the power of medicine. Through all of the late nights, early mornings, and countless containers of coffee that I have consumed, I am reminded of what it means to wear a white coat. A simple interaction with a physician years ago reminds me that in medicine we are not treating diseases; we are treating patients. That the human condition is more than a collection of cells and tissues carefully arranged into the being sitting on the exam table in front of us. And that, I believe, has been the most valuable lesson that I have learned in my medical career.

As I transition into my clinical years, I am faced with the decision of beginning to pick a specialty. Though I am uncertain as to what I am going to be, my experience has already answered the more important question of who I am going to be – a physician that puts patients before profits, and one that humanizes healthcare. While the future may be uncertain, it also looks promising, but we will have to wait and see what lies in store until the next chapter in the story is written. ■