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Maya Joseph

The Life, the Soul, and Caring for them Both

Sukey Waller asks, “which is more important, the life or the soul?” (Fadiman 277).

Doctors spend years training in human anatomy, physiology, and biology in order to properly care for the body of a patient. The mind, the body, and the spirit are all vital to an individual’s health, and in order to fully care for patients, someone needs to look out for their soul as well as their body. Chaplains and other spiritual leaders can play a role in this. If a hospital system desires to improve the outcomes of difficult cases such as Lia’s, and in fact all cases, holistic approaches should be taken to ensure that a patient will receive well-rounded care that takes care of not only their life, but their soul as well.

The physicians at Merced County Medical Center are definitely overworked; Dr. Dan Murphy recounts in the afterword that he only had “fifteen minutes at MCMC” to spend with his patients (Fadiman 293). When doctors do not even have the time to check in with their patients regarding basic screenings, they can not possibly entertain the thought of asking about their mental and spiritual health. Physicians should not be alone in caring for a patient. When it came to Lia and her family, the doctors were only part of the team trying to save her life. They worked alongside social workers, spiritual leaders, and hospital staff, and even so, they were not enough to effectively communicate and collaborate to meet their common goal. With so little time to spend on each patient, the MCMC physicians had more patients than they knew what to do with and not enough time to connect with most of them. However, with inadequate wellness resources, it falls on the physician’s lap to care for both the life and the soul in fifteen minutes, which is an arduous task that is unfair to ask of any one human being.

When a person is troubled, especially when they are in poor health, they often look to a deity or a spiritual presence to help them feel at peace. Religious leaders are seen as direct lines to these spiritual beings, and access to chaplains while in a hospital can help patients feel more comfortable, which improves medical outcomes (Park et al.). A 2010 study of advanced heart failure patients conducted at the University of Connecticut traced the link between “religious struggle,” or a strained relationship with their belief system to many mental and physical health factors. Researchers found that “religious struggle remained [...] a significant positive predictor of nights hospitalized” (Park et al.). In other words, patients who were satisfied with their spirituality had shorter hospital stays and faster healing periods. Luckily, most hospitals now employ a full staff of chaplains. These workers, who are similar to social workers, “are specially trained to support belief systems across faiths and cultures,” and can certainly help patients feel less of the aforementioned religious struggle (Frank 2017). Chaplains are also advocates for both the medical staff and the patients they care for, building relationships and trust with the patients. By partnering with the doctors, chaplains let their patients know that they are all a team to care for their mind, body, and spirit.

A chaplain would have been helpful in the Lee family’s situation. Allowing a *tvix neeb* or a shaman to help care for Lia at the hospital center would have eased some of the qualms her parents had with Western medicine. While Jeanine was a wonderful social worker and advocate for the Lees, she did not share or deeply understand the Hmong religious beliefs to the extent that a *tvix neeb* might have (Fadiman 205). Unfortunately, when Lia was a patient at MCMC, it was a severely underfunded public hospital that did not have the budget to employ chaplains, and the only Hmong-speaking staff they had were the janitors (Fadiman 67). A *tvix neeb* could have

provided the security to the Lee family that while the doctors worked to restore Lia's brain, he would work to restore her soul.

It seems that the administration at Merced must have also taken note of these inadequacies in their approach to patient care, since in 2009, they "instituted the country's first formal shaman policy, a systematic plan to integrate *tvix neeb*s into patient care" (Fadiman 294). The Partners in Healing program helped *tvix neeb*s in learning about aspects of Western patient care that are especially new to Hmong patients, such as blood tests and operating rooms. By training these revered religious officials in Western medicine and practices, these hospitals have given them the ability to console their patients and encourage them to trust that the doctors are taking care of their body while they focus on the soul.

While it is seen in Lia's story that negative spiritual well-being can lead to negative physical well-being, studies have shown that positive spiritual well-being can lead to positive physical well-being (Park et al.). Heart failure patients were studied to have longer time spent in the hospital with more complications when they have poor spiritual health, and it can be inferred that a positive relationship with one's spirituality can decrease hospital stay times (Park et al.). When Lia is returned home in her vegetative state, she continues to live for 26 years, decades longer than most in her state survive. Lia was not fully functioning, but she could sense the presence of those who loved her the most (Fadiman 290). Lia stayed alive, and it is likely to the credit of her family and their love and care, and possibly also their constant prayers and rituals in her honor.

Perhaps the key to effectively treating the body is to treat the soul. If patients trust their doctors, as encouraged by chaplains and shamans, doctors are then able to effectively treat the

patients. The practice of medicine does not only include medications; holistic care needs to go beyond a list of prescribed pills. Spirituality and a soul at peace are also important to medical care, and this can be provided in the form of chaplains and other spiritual leaders in hospitals. When families feel that they can trust a member of the hospital staff, such as a medically trained *tvix neeb*, based on a spiritual connection, they are more likely to trust other medical personnel, which can lead to greater understanding of the care provided and better response to that care. If a patient feels that their soul is healthy, hopefully, their body will follow suit. May hospitals around the world take note of Lia's story, and may it inspire them to bring a holistic, well-rounded approach to healthcare to all of their patients.

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