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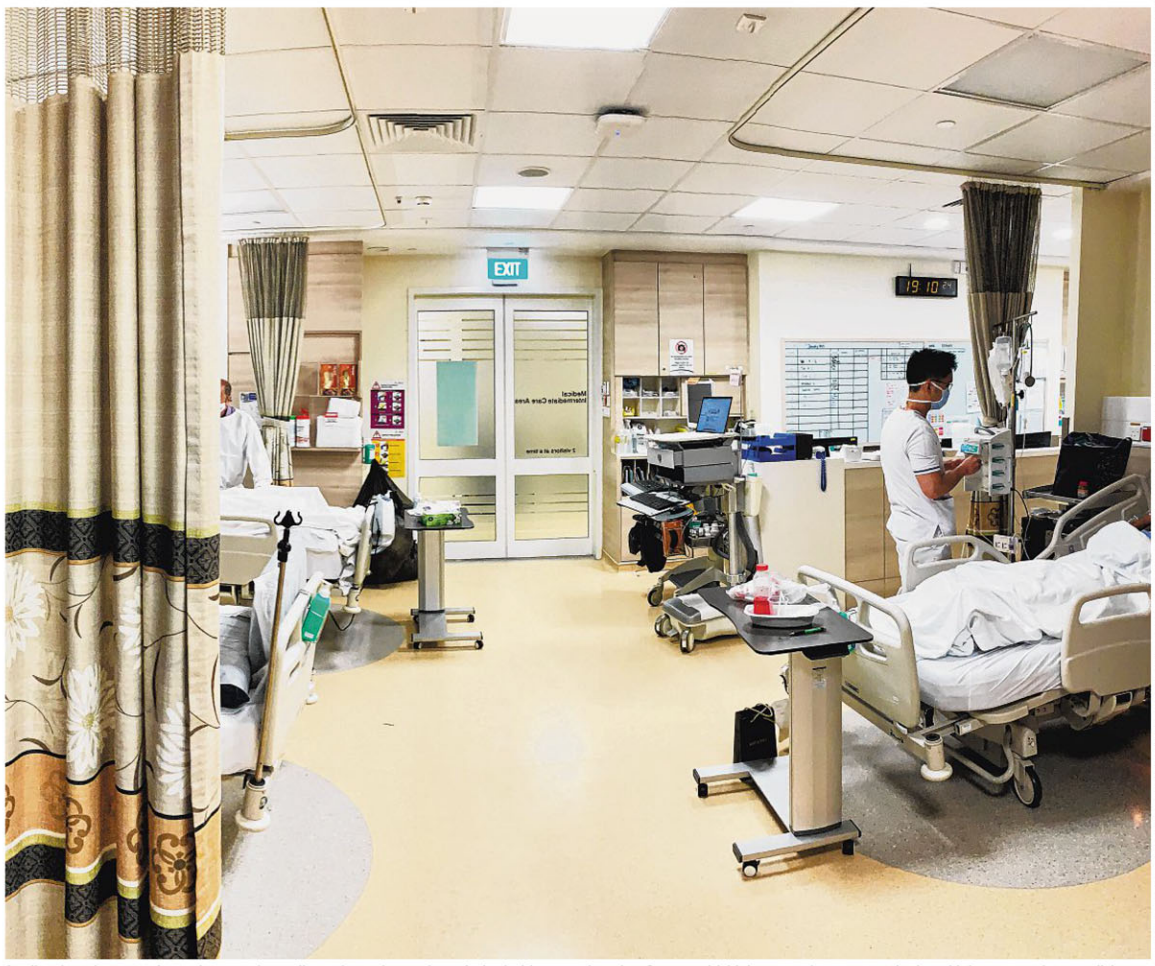
My grandpa's heart attack taught me a doctor's care goes beyond the patient



Studies show that empathy can improve the quality and experience of care for both sides, says the writer. Doctors with higher empathy scores tend to have higher personal accomplishment and less emotional exhaustion, while patients' perception of a doctor's empathy is linked to improved health outcomes and satisfaction. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

I felt powerless in the face of my grandfather's hospitalisation, but my interactions with the medical team made me realise the importance of empathy and communication.

Faye Ng Yu Ci

In medical school, where I am a final-year student, a large part of our training centres on patient communication. As part of our final graduating exams, we simulate clinical encounters with patients and family members to assess our communication, professionalism and ability to handle challenging situations.

Cases include breaking bad news to family, apologising for medical errors and counselling for chronic conditions.

Despite my years of medical training, I was unnerved when – for the first time in my life – I found myself on the other side of the hospital gantry, as the caregiver of my acutely ill grandfather.

There I was, struggling to push the wheelchair with his heavy body along corridors packed with waiting patients and their worried families. I had to stop, study the signs and recall the directions given to me by the reception desk.

I was no wiser on how to navigate the emergency department despite walking through these same walkways as a medical student countless times, disoriented and confused, my heart pounding.

When I finally located the triage nurse, I gave a brief history as she took my grandfather's blood pressure, then watched him being wheeled away into the resuscitation area without me.

"Family members can wait outside by the ambulance bay," the nurse gestured kindly.

On the occasion that I wanted most to be part of the action, I was confined to the backbench.

I sat along the row of plastic chairs outside the emergency department with my mother and grandmother, the air quivering between us. Minutes passed, and it was almost an hour before the phone rang.

The doctor conveyed the situation to us gravely and plainly: My grandfather had what was likely a heart attack. He would need to be admitted overnight for monitoring.

From there, events unfolded in a flurry: We signed the forms for my grandfather to be admitted, went back home to pack his belongings and delivered them to a staff member at the counter.

Then, as instructed, we went home to rest and wait. At 1am, we received a call that there were electrical waveform changes on my grandfather's heart tracing, signalling he was having a repeated heart attack.

He was being rushed in for an emergency procedure to relieve an obstruction in his heart vessel.

At 3am, we received a call that the procedure had gone smoothly, and my grandfather was out of critical danger. He would be transferred to the cardiac care unit, and we could visit him the next morning.

I embraced my mother and grandmother. "Grandpa's going to be okay," I said through tears.

Throughout the incident, I was grateful for how our family was constantly kept in the loop about my grandfather's progress by the medical team, and that the doctors were patient enough to explain the entire situation to us.

Reflecting on my interactions with the medical team, it made a difference when the doctor over the phone asked if I had any further questions.

I felt warmed when he reassured me and encouraged me to turn in soon before we hung up. More than understanding my grandfather's condition and how he was doing, I realised I wanted to be cared for as well.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

As a student of medicine, I have learnt about empathy frameworks and communication principles in theory. As part of the school's student internship programme, I've put these skills into practice talking to patients and calling to update their family.

In an uncanny turn of events, the roles were reversed.

The fear, anxiety and panic were all too real and palpable.

I felt powerless in the face of sickness and mortality, devoid of my usual clinical acumen and composure.

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There are even tests to assess that – as part of their entrance requirements, medical schools often require candidates to answer an array of psychometric questions. Yet the science is imprecise and can seldom be quantified.

Paradoxically, research has shown that empathy seems to be a rare trait among doctors – difficult to possess and even harder to retain.

There is compelling evidence that empathy declines through medical school and specialist training.

In a study, doctors at the University of Chicago underwent functional brain imaging while watching videos of acupuncture treatment.

Compared with controls, the doctors showed significantly less activation in the regions of the brain involved in "empathy" and showed greater brain activity in areas involved in executive control and self-regulation.

Meanwhile, in a study published in the Singapore Medical Journal, junior doctors had lower empathy and higher rates of burnout compared with their United States counterparts.

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The local healthcare system is not a forgiving one. Long work hours, high patient loads and exacting demands from seniors often cripple a doctor's ability to provide individualised, humane care to every patient.

Associate Professor Tan Boon Yeow, chief executive of St Luke's Hospital, said in an interview that the negative impact on a healthcare worker's well-being exists on a spectrum, from compassion fatigue to physical burnout.

Local hospitals, especially public institutions, tend to run on limited resources and manpower, with pressure to work fast and turn around patients rapidly.

Key performance indicators for departments and individual doctors spur practices and behaviour geared towards productivity and efficiency.

Updating electronic medical records has also increased the administrative and documentation workload of doctors, taking them away from face-to-face interaction with patients.

Yet medicine, at its core, is a relationship and not a science. Research has shown that patients respond best to doctors when they realise their doctors care.

As a professor once shared: "People rarely care about how much you know until they believe how much you care."

Patient interactions with healthcare staff can truly make or break their trust in and perception of medical providers, as well as the healthcare system at large.

In a previous commentary, Dr Jeremy Lim shared that a hug he would never forget was from an obstetrician not directly involved in the care of his twins, when they took their last breaths after being born severely prematurely.

She happened to walk past the ward and made the effort to reach out to the family. It was an act of kindness they remembered.

Studies have shown that empathy can improve the quality and experience of care for patients and healthcare professionals alike.

Doctors with higher empathy scores tend to have higher personal accomplishment, less emotional exhaustion and less feeling of depersonalisation.

GOOD FOR PATIENTS' HEALTHCARE

On the other hand, patients' perception of a doctor's empathy is associated with improved health outcomes and satisfaction.

Patients who have good relationships with their doctors are more inclined to give fuller histories and reveal key pieces of information that might be personal or sensitive, yet possibly crucial to the diagnosis.

Patients who trust and value their doctor's advice are also more likely to follow through with the treatment plan and take their medication.

Correspondingly, studies have shown that physicians who adopt a warm, friendly and motivational persona are more effective than those who keep consultations formal and do not offer assurance.

Medicine is a two-way street, where patients share their doubts, hopes and concerns, and doctors try to give advice from a medical perspective.

As such, it is important for doctors to be patient and willing to listen, so they can tailor their management to each patient.

In a commencement speech, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman instructed: "Never underestimate how much people just want to feel they have been heard, and once you have given them that chance, they will hear you."

Healthcare is at once a universal and personal endeavour, comprising a medley of fervent stories, intricate emotions and contemplative medicine.

The hospital is a place we will all end up at some point in our lives, either as a patient, or the close contact of a family member or a friend.

Taking on the role of my grandfather's granddaughter, I understood how frustrating and nerve-racking it was to be the next of kin of a patient, and how intently our family relied on the updates from the medical team.

In my work as a future doctor, I hope to treat patient communication with utmost sanctity and respect, and care for patients and their family with even greater empathy.

I now appreciate that for the doctor, a patient is just one of many – but for the loved one, the patient is the one and only.

• Faye Ng Yu Ci is a final-year medical student at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore.