

“Does it revolve around a title?” - a fourth year medical student’s report of a community-based clinical rotation

It is just after test week - we are all tired and looking forward to a more restful time. Yes we rested, but I never imagined that I would learn more in the next four weeks than I had in the previous four buried in my books,.....especially about people, the people I would meet but even more about my classmatesand indeed why we were studying medicine.

This realization began the first Wednesday with our visit to Thloloe village. I was amazed at the remarks and facial expressions of my “friends”. Later when I calmed down I came to the conclusion that they were shocked by what they had seen. People who come from the affluent part of society, who know little about pain and suffering, people who desire the title “Doctor” – to care for people—but who look with an expression of disdain on “uncared for” people—why?? Does it just revolve around glamour or do we really want to help people? I drove home with a lump in my throat, not because I felt sorry for the people of Thloloe, but because I realized we were returning to a society dominated by rivalry, status and being the best. My “inner me” wanted to stay behind amongst these people with their sincere desire to help each other with the little they had. Personally, I feel that they have more of the essence of life than we, who have all, do.

I think it was an outstanding opportunity for people who do not know such circumstances, to become aware of how other people live. This will be even more important in the future when we will need to adapt our management of our patients according to such circumstances.

I.....I was left with the question: do I really want to help people?

My answer came the first Friday at Majaneng clinic. When we arrived, Sr. Deborah said she had a patient she wished us to see. All four of us went into the consulting room. We had to take a complete history and do an examination. We could immediately see that this lady, Anna, was very sick and depressed as well. As we fourth years generally do, we began by looking through Anna’s file and came across an envelope with a letter which simply stated that Anna was HIV + and gave a telephone number. This was our first contact with such a patient. I could feel the tension rise. Our anxious expressions were obvious. Well, we had to examine her because Sr. Deborah would be back in half an hour to hear what our findings were. It went well with the history taking but when it came to the examination, two of us “lost interest” and went outside. (Too many people in the small room was a convenient excuse to avoid the situation.) I was afraid and put on gloves to feel the axillary and inguinal lymphnodes. Anna also complained of a dark vaginal discharge which indicated that we should do a vaginal examination but we took her word for it and did not pursue the matter further. For the rest we tried to be as thorough as possible.

On her return Sr. Deborah asked if we had done a vaginal examination and then told me to do one. I could feel my heart pounding in my throat. I don’t know if I must be grateful that it happened to me or if the other students know something that I don’t, but as I turned around to fetch another pair of gloves, a great calm came over me. I wanted to help and support this patient, irrespective of the fact that she has only a short while to live as a result of advanced AIDS. It didn’t matter how I would be affected or what the risk to

me was. With a great calmness and peace within me, I put on the gloves and did a complete vaginal examination.

I don’t think I realized the value of what happened to me that Friday, until the discussion we had with our lecturer on the next Tuesday afternoon. We spoke about AIDS and the opinions that were expressed really upset me. I realize how afraid everyone was of patients with AIDS. Some said they would refuse to touch such patients. It was their right to refuse to treat them. I was very angry inside with all those who want to be doctors and yet feel like that about a sick person. I thought that being a doctor was an unselfish commitment that you made to treat people as far as you could, and then to support them as much as possible.

I don’t know if I have not grasped the whole picture yet, and am still immature in my outlook. But, that Tuesday afternoon when I went to my room, I realized the value of that indescribable peace that came over me. I knelt down and thanked my Heavenly Father for what happened to me that Friday and I prayed that my classmates would also experience a sense of peace about why they are here— to really assist those in need even if they have AIDS or no food to eat—or does it still just revolve around a title?

I am really grateful to all those who made this block possible because I reached one of the most important milestones of a person’s life, namely certainty about my life’s purpose, namely to help others unconditionally even if they have nothing to give in return.

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