

There's Always Something You Can Do

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When I was a 3rd year medical student, 43 years ago, my first cousin asked me if I'd like to accompany him on rounds at a local nursing home. Cousin Maj was internist and a geriatrician. Having never been to a nursing home before I looked forward to spending an afternoon with him and exploring the unknown. After 30 minutes of rounding on these old, seemingly hopeless souls, I asked Maj, "Why do you come to these places," to which he immediately replied, "There's always SOMETHING that you can do!" As physicians, we are often tasked with having to ask ourselves, what we can offer patients who are dying and for which there is no hope. Last week I saw Lupe, one of my hospice patients, at the nursing home. There she lay in bed with end stage contractures of all four extremities due to end stage rheumatoid arthritis. Her arms lay useless across her chest. She was unable to feed, bathe or dress herself. In fact, when family members would visit she could not hug anyone. Her frail, emaciated body weighed just 55 lbs. Lupe spent her days looking at her bare bedroom walls, waiting for a nurses aid to stop by to hand feed her three times each day. Outside of hospice, Lupe rarely had visitors. She had no cell phone or means to communicate with the outside world. What would be the purpose of even having a phone if dialing a number was physically impossible? Lupe had no clothes, and simply wore the standard nursing home gown tied loosely behind her neck.

Yet, Lupe could move her head and her brain was functioning perfectly well. As a retired kindergarten teacher, Lupe always provided me with heartfelt stories about how her "kids" use to visit her years after entering college just to thank her for being the best teacher ever. Her favorite story was about a little 5 year old girl who brought "homework" into class on her first day of kindergarten and proudly presented her stick figure drawing to her teacher. The stick figure lacked arms, but did have a head and 2 very crooked legs. Lupe looked at the girl's hard work, smiled and told her mother, "Your daughter is going to make everyone in the world sing one

day. You'll see!" That little girl went on to become a very talented singer/songwriter who's music is known worldwide. Over the past few months, I looked forward to my visits with Lupe. I enjoyed hearing her tales and joking with her that I believed she was also my kindergarten teacher back when I was 5 years old. Yet, my last visit to Lupe was so different.

Entering her room, I noticed that Lupe was watching a football game on TV. "Lupe, I didn't know that you were into football!" "No, doctor, I know nothing about football, but the nurse turned the TV on 2 hours ago and I can't work the remote to change the channel." She then started crying and asked, "Dr. please tell me why I am still alive? What is my purpose in this life? I can do absolutely nothing for myself. Day after day I sit in this bed and just want to die." The site of this lovely soul crying made my heart sink. I sat at her bedside and touched her withered, deformed hand with my freezing cold hand. Lupe screamed, "Your hand is ice cold!" I asked her if I could hold her hand just for a short while and she reluctantly agreed. "All I want to do is die. I have no purpose on this earth. I am a burden to everyone who tries to help me."

Lupe begged me to help her die, but as a physician, I believe that we must protect, not destroy life. I then noticed that the my ice cold hand clutching Lupe's clenched fist was now warm. I smiled and said, "Hey Lupe, guess what...you just warmed up my freezing hand in less than 5 minutes, and you know what else? I now understand your purpose in life and why God put you on this earth. Your purpose is to warm the hearts and souls of everyone around you. Yes, that is why you are in this nursing home and why you are MY patient."

For the first time in 5 visits, I saw Lupe smile. I then took a couple of steps backwards and said, "Hey, Lupe, can you please give me 3 thumbs up?" Lupe then mustered as much strength as she could

and managed to extend both of her contorted thumbs skyward. I applauded her efforts and thanked her for making my day so special. Lupe smiled and asked, “Doctor, will you come back to see me soon?” Without hesitation I told her that I looked forward to holding her hand once again.

Late that evening I received a call from the hospice nurse informing me that Lupe had died. The cause of death was listed officially as protein-calorie malnutrition. Yet, I know that once

Lupe understood her true reason for enduring such a miserable and painful disease she was at peace. Lupe died knowing that she gave comfort to so many other human beings as a teacher and as the patient of her physician at the nursing home. She warmed all of our hearts and souls.

To all of my fellow physicians and practitioners, remember, “there is always something that you can do!”