

About Losing a Resident

Maricarmen Cruz-Jimenez, MD, FAAPMR

I sat in the fourth row of the hospital chapel. My heart rushed a million beats per minute. I was listening to Dr G give the eulogy of a former resident who we had lost a few days before in a car accident. He had just graduated from his fellowship 2 weeks before.

Dr G is a good, wise man with too many years as an academician. Even though he is a strong man, I could hear his voice trembling. I could see his tearful eyes as he struggled to organize his thoughts and say beautiful things about the lost resident. As I listened, I wondered how I would be able to stand in front of the resident's family. As a leader, people expect much of you. I am the designated institutional official, so I have been asked more than once to rise to a difficult occasion in times of white water. And yet, what troubled my mind was the possibility of breaking down like I did the week before, in front of the residents.

Dr G invited others to say something, but I could see people evading his eyes. Then he stared at me. I knew it was my turn. For a second I asked myself if I should, but as I thought about it, I was already on my way to the altar. The chapel was full of people standing against the walls, including faculty, service chiefs, residents, and staff from other services who knew about the tragedy. The resident's family was there, filling the front rows, and his kids were cuddled against their mother. Then I saw her, his wife, vulnerable and strong at the same time. "Oh Lord, give me the strength, let me be your instrument to inspire this family with peace and comfort," I thought. I had to be courageous for her and for everyone in this profoundly silent room.

I don't recall the specifics of what I said, perhaps something about appreciating life and about that resident's journey. But I do remember how I felt when everything ended, her warm hug and her words of appreciation. That made it for me.

I also realized we do not know half of the stories of our residents. This was a resident I had seen walking through the hospital's hallways for 6 years. He started in internal medicine and then became a nephrology fellow. We knew each other from the

hallways, like one gets to know many people in the hospital. I hugged him at graduation, and we all rejoiced when he brought his kids up on the stage to celebrate his diploma. The incredible thing was that only the universe knew that this was his grand finale; he was departing making sure he had left an unforgotten legacy, having modeled the true values of service to everyone who observed him. We just did not realize it, not until his death.

Two days before at the funeral home, we had heard his wife sharing the life story of this amazing person. He was young, handsome, a remarkable friend, and a great family man. If numbers would talk, he was greatly loved, just based on the number of people present at the service. It was then that I discovered why. He got married very young, and this taught him his first lesson about love and commitment. He was a hardworking man and a proud father; he provoked laughs in his kids by playing karaoke songs with them. He used that same sense of humor to bring smiles to his patients. At work, he appeared to be serious, but in reality, he was just a humble soul, an observer, just paying attention to the people around him. I more fully understood this when I learned about his life. In the community, he would dedicate 1 night a week to meet with friends off work, but in reality it was just an excuse to reach out to vulnerable people, provide health guidance tips, celebrate a lonely person's birthday with cake, and encourage these friends through their diseases and not-so-fortunate lives. The most extraordinary story was how he was able to pull a drug-addicted homeless patient off the streets, clean him up, and guide him back into finding a job. That individual is still drug-free today.

As the designated institutional official, my role in essence is oversight, ensuring adherence to rules and procedures. But having had this type of reality check, I truly wonder what our roles as medical academicians should be. It has been a while since Hippocrates wrote the oath, and although many things have changed, the essence of medicine and medical professionalism has not. How much humanism do we really practice? Does the competency of professionalism truly entail cultivating altruism—devoted and disinterested service? Are we "the

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-15-00533.1>

good teachers”? How can we foster the spirit of connecting with people, if we ourselves choose to observe our fellow humans from an acceptable distance, instead of being implicated in their growth?

In an instant, this resident taught me so many things, including what an honor it is to be a teacher. The greatest question I am asking now is: “Am I making a difference in the life of my residents?” As I search for answers, I know one thing: I want to leave a positive footprint, a legacy. Learning from this amazing resident-teacher I realize I want to be awake to life, I want to get involved, I want to take better

care of people and practice compassionate service. I want to be a good teacher.



Maricarmen Cruz-Jimenez, MD, FAAPMR, is Designated Institutional Official, VA Caribbean Healthcare System, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Assistant Professor, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, San Juan, and Associate Professor, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, School of Medicine, Universidad Central del Caribe, Bayamon, Puerto Rico.

Corresponding author: Maricarmen Cruz-Jimenez, MD, FAAPMR, VA Caribbean Healthcare System (14), Casia No. 10, San Juan, PR 00921, 787.641.7582, ext 32900 and ext 32903, maricarmen.cruz-jimenez@va.gov