Nothing Squeezes Like it Used To
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February 2014

Story from the Front Lines

A 74-year-old man recounted to me how he used to dive onto steers from horseback and tackle them to the ground.. Now retired from the cowboy life, he likes to sit on his porch in the late afternoons, soaking up sun, vodka, and mountain air. Last year, his family worried about him living alone so they sold his house and took him into their Denver home. Weeks later he escaped -- “I didn’t care much for those skyscrapers,” he explained -- and purchased a trailer back in his rural Colorado town, parking it right next to the little café that he frequents daily. He didn’t like to compromise his simple, independent way of life.

Slowly becoming more frail, his family continued to worry about him, and after he revealed over the phone that he was dealing with a particularly severe bout of diarrhea over the preceding week, his son corralled him into the emergency department. Not a fan of doctors or their pills, he wasn’t terribly excited about the visit. “If it weren’t for these dang runs, I’d have never agreed to come,” he said. What bothered him most was his persistently loose stools rather than the distended neck veins and swollen legs he’d never paid much attention to.

I was called to admit the patient for evaluation and treatment of new-onset heart failure. “Your heart doesn’t appear to be squeezing like it used to,” I explained. “Of course it doesn’t,” he retorted, “I’m almost 75-years-old. My hands don’t squeeze like they use to either.” He submitted his arthritic fingers for inspection. After a couple days of diuresis, we carefully initiated a low-dose beta blocker in the hopes of reducing adverse outcomes from heart failure. To our dismay, severe hypotension ensued. With nurses swarming around him to start vasopressors, the patient looked at me and whispered, "You know, you still haven't fixed the thing I came to you for." Stool studies finally came back positive for clostridium difficile and he was started on oral vancomycin.

With aggressive support and beta blocker withdrawal, his blood pressure normalized though he declined cardiac catheterization and other investigations to find the cause of his heart failure. He just wanted to be home in time to watch the Super Bowl. We missed that goal by three days, but he was wheeled out of there smiling, carrying four bottles of pills that he’ll probably never take, and waving goodbye to the doctors he hopes he never sees again.

Teachable Moment

I’ve long acknowledged the importance of establishing goals of care, and indeed most clinicians consistently inquire about patient wishes pertaining to resuscitation and to end-of-life support. This case has served as my reminder that one must seize every opportunity to align the medical plan with patient goals even when death doesn’t seem to be an imminent possibility. Patient-centered care requires that all clinical decisions be responsive to individual patient preferences, needs, and values. Even if our
actions hadn’t led to our patient’s cardiogenic shock, I may have done a disservice to him by trying to fix his heart when to him it wasn’t worth the time away from home. I never explicitly addressed what treatment of his heart failure would entail, instead assuming that he’d agree to proceed -- an all-too-common assumption among clinicians.  

Ideally, it’s best to establish a patient’s care goals as soon as possible. Unfortunately, these conversations are difficult at the time of admission for decompensated heart failure as patients are frequently uncomfortable and often require urgent management. It is thus recognized that optimal shared decision making requires patient preferences to have been discussed previously and documented in the outpatient setting, an essential component to the concept of “anticipatory guidance”.  

If I had realized and accepted up front that this gentleman wouldn’t agree to a workup for cardiomyopathy, was averse to taking pills, and really didn’t like doctors much, I may not have initiated the events that followed. I would have just fixed his diarrhea and ushered him towards his trailer in the mountains.

