

The Catholic Doctor Is In: A chance to Say Goodbye

In last month's article I talked about three very special patients who presented to the hospital during the same week and all were at the end of their lives. Let me share the story of one of the other people. I met this particular gentleman about 30 years ago because of heart rhythm problems. He could be gruff and cantankerous but always very loveable. He was a truck driver by trade and boy, did he have stories to tell. I suspect there may have been a little embellishment now and then but over the 100 or so times I saw him over the years I can't remember one time that I didn't walk out of the room without a smile on my face having just enjoyed some laughter and usually another great story.

I'll call him Joe. When Joe was 83 years old he became very unstable because of severe coronary artery blockage and we made the difficult decision together to have him undergo high risk bypass surgery. I remember him telling me he was going to live until he died and he would not tolerate being sick and restricted waiting for the big one to happen. He did great! My staff and I continued to be entertained with each visit he made to the office after surgery.

As he turned 86 he developed a more rare form of heart disease called a restrictive cardiomyopathy. He did surprisingly well for a few years but then I realized during his last several visits that his time was coming. It was not long after that, he presented to Lutheran Hospital very early one morning, with the sky still dark, in cardiogenic shock and having intermittent life threatening arrhythmias. As is common now days he was admitted by the hospitalist team.

As I began to make rounds early that morning I was notified he had been admitted and was in critical condition. I headed over to the ICU to see him. As I arrived I was greeted by a young wide eyed male nurse who was very animated and clearly shaken. He told me during the past several hours my patient had apparently died several times. Joe had went into a very rapid ventricular tachycardia (VT) and became unresponsive and pulseless for more than a minute. The VT spontaneously resolved and his heart began to beat in a normal rhythm once again. (For those of you with a medical background wondering why he wasn't shocked. He had appropriately declared himself a "do not resuscitate" or "allow natural death" (A.N.D.)) He remained unconscious for several minutes but then woke up and began talking to his son who was the only family member at his bedside. Joe had a loving family but most of them, like me, were just being notified of his critical status that morning. His nurse then told me about Joe's second apparent death which had occurred just minutes before I arrived. He went into asystole, better known by all as "flat line". His nurse told me it lasted for 4 minutes

(which I still find hard to believe) and he was sure Joe had died. In all my years of cardiology, I have never seen anybody's heart stop that long only to begin beating again. In fact, there would be permanent brain damage in most people at that length of time.

As his son sat vigil at the bedside, Joe's heart began beating slowly and then back to a normal pattern. He regained consciousness and was transiently confused. This is finally when I entered the room to assess old Joe. He recognized me at once (his brain was fine!) and thanked me for coming. I had an honest conversation with him and he knew this was the end of the road for him. I left but came back about an hour later to find his room filled with about 15 people, all family and close friends. He told everybody in the room he was ready to go. Knowing the family well I asked Joe if it would be ok if we all prayed together. I subsequently led the family in prayer in one of the most precious moments I have ever spent at a patient's bedside. There were hugs and tears all around as I left the room but promised Joe I would be back soon to check on him again.

About an hour later I returned to find the room full of his love ones and Joe unconscious taking his last breaths. He passed moments later. This was not your typical death. It WAS a death that I wish more people could have. Joe embraced the fact it was his time and he was surrounded by family and friends as he entered into the kingdom of God.

So why didn't Joe die when he had that sustained run of ventricular tachycardia? And why didn't he die when he flat lined for such a long time. Of course only God knows, but I have witnessed this many times over the years as I have been entrusted with end-of-life care for my patients. There are the cases when my patient has been unresponsive for days only to wake up, say their goodbyes to their loved ones and then soon thereafter slip away. I remember multiple cases where patients are intubated on life support and heading toward death when they inexplicably rallied and were able to be extubated so they could once again talk to their family just before they died.

Now I think Joe was very ready to die. I think he would have been very happy to die when he had the VT or the asystole. In fact, I will never forget him looking at me and his son and saying "I am ready, let's get this over with" and his son lovingly saying to his father, "sorry dad but you are not on that committee". I could be wrong, but I think God allowed Joe to survive those last few hours not for him to say goodbye but rather to give some of his loved ones an opportunity to gather at his bedside, pray, and be at peace with his death. As a popular Christian song says "Our God is an awesome God!"

Dr. Dave Kaminkas is a cardiologist at Lutheran. He serves as treasurer of the Dr. Jerome Lejuene Catholic Medical Guild of Northeast Indiana (www.fortwaynecma.com).

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