

The Catholic Doctor Is In: An Anniversary of Sorts

Very recently I walked into an exam room to see one of my last patients of the day. He was now 76 years old and sat next to his supportive wife. As soon as I walk into the room he says: doc we are celebrating an anniversary. I said wonderful, how many years have you guys been married? He then tells me no, it's not OUR anniversary pointing to his wife; it is OUR anniversary pointing to me. March of 1985 he says. Finally I get it. He is referring to the first time we met as patient and doctor some 30 years ago. It was 24 hours that that both of us will never forget.

He presented to the St. Joseph Hospital emergency room with severe chest pain and was having a heart attack. Back then would be considered ancient times in cardiology. Acute myocardial infarctions were not treated then like they are now. The treatment now is to rush them to the cardiac catheterization lab and open the occluded artery with angioplasty and then stent the blockage. Back in 1985 we would give a thrombolytic (clot buster) to try to dissolve the thrombus (clot) that had formed at the cholesterol plaque closing the artery and causing the heart attack. We would also do a lot of praying because it would only open the artery about 70% of the time. One of the complications that could occur was significant bleeding and if the patient bled into their brain it would be fatal. This man's artery did open with the clot buster and his chest pain and EKG improved. One of the first signs, though, that the artery is opening can be a thing called reperfusion arrhythmias. Reperfusion means that blood flow is restored and now there is oxygenated blood flowing down the artery to heart muscle cells that were in the process of dying. For a variety of complex reasons, this occasionally can cause very threatening arrhythmias called ventricular tachycardia (VT) or ventricular fibrillation (VF). My 46 year old patient did exactly that—VF. This causes the blood pressure to immediately go to nothing and without successful cardioversion (shock) the patient is essentially dead. One shock and he woke up asking me what the heck just happened.

We rushed him up to the CCU, got him in his bed, and we put the paddles at the bedside in case it happened again. Well it did..... again and again and again. Now it was VT. This is just a hair better than VF because you maintain consciousness a little longer. In this case, I stayed at the bedside with the paddles inches away from my patient hoping I would not have to use them again. I still remember, and so does my patient, how it went. I would be chatting with him at the bedside and he would know when he went into the VT by the severe lightheadedness that he would feel before he passed out. I still remember him saying "doc, it's happening again;" then he would pass out and I would shock him. I shocked him over 30 times that night. Neither of us can remember the exact count but we both know it was 30-something. During this last office visit as we

reminisced, somehow he remembers that the shocks didn't hurt and he asked me why. After all these years this IS something that I do remember. I knew that all these shocks would be terribly painful if he was awake, so when he went into the VT I would always wait till he was unconscious (clinically dead) before shocking him. In fact, I can still remember the nurse at the bedside saying to me -- Doctor why are you waiting so long to shock him! Well, my patient kind of appreciated that waiting period even still today.

This man is a very active Christian and worships at a non-denominational church here in town. He is the type of man that lights up the room when he walks in. His attitude is always one of optimism. (I personally could use some optimism sometime). He has ministered to ME now for 30 years. I have learned a lot from this man. He is a man that God gave a second chance to and when you get another chance at life you don't want to waste it. He certainly hasn't. As it says in Psalms 30: 3-4, "O Lord, my God, I cried out to you and you healed me. O Lord, you brought me up from the nether world; you preserved me from among those going down into the pit."

By the way, if you are wondering if this man holds the record for the most shocks a patient received under my care the answer is no. I had a lady get 79 shocks (yes we really did count them) and then live another 10 years! Praise God.

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

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