Leslie’s story

When there is nothing more to be done, a physician offers compassion and wonders whether it was enough.

BY ANDREA WESTBY, M.D.

I frequently lose sleep over patients. I think it has something to do with my underlying anxiety and perfectionism. I think about difficult cases, replay less-than-ideal interactions and worry about a missed diagnosis or that I did something wrong. However, the case that gave me my most significant case of insomnia was one in which I was helpless as a physician and felt my patient’s pain as if it were my own. Her sadness haunted my dreams for months.

I first met Leslie* in a time of crisis. She was 22 weeks pregnant. Her first two pregnancies had ended in late first trimester or early second trimester miscarriages, so I assumed she had spent the previous months planning and praying, thankful that she finally would have a baby. However, on the day I met her, she had come in twice because of pelvic pressure and cramping, and at her second visit, in the emergency room, an ultrasound revealed complete cervical dilation. The fetal head was already descending into the birth canal. Her obstetrician had been called, but he was away, and someone needed to give her the news, as well as deliver the child. I had been practicing medicine independently for only 12 months, but I knew that this would be one of the hardest things I would ever have to do.

Our rural hospital has 25 beds, four of which are labor and delivery suites, and we only on rare emergent occasions deliver patients before 36 weeks. The nurses on duty that evening continually questioned me: Shouldn’t we transfer her somewhere else? Shouldn’t she be seen by the neonatal specialists and perinatologists at our referral hospital? Wasn’t there something else we should be doing?

Unfortunately for Leslie and her child, the answer was no. There wasn’t anything to be done. Her perfectly formed baby boy was about to be born too soon, too early to live, and there wasn’t anything I or anyone else could do to stop it.

I wasn’t sure how much Leslie knew when I walked into the room. Dressed in a hospital gown, she was nestled into her bed with her husband sitting at her side. They looked up at me wide-eyed and hopeful. I sat down and placed my hand (continued on page 31)
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on hers. I took a slow deep breath and told her that she would soon deliver and that her son would soon be born too soon to live. I asked if there was anyone she would like us to call. It took a few moments for my words to connect, and in that time, I held my breath.

After the situation became clear, she began sobbing. With gentle tear-filled eyes, she looked up at me and began imploring me to give her different news. “Isn’t there anything else we can do to stop this?” she pleaded. “Isn’t there any way that he can live? Please, please, do something.”

As physicians, we are trained to heal, to help, to save. When the tools we have are not enough, the only ones that remain are those with which we are born and that make us human—compassion, empathy and caring.

I remained silent for a brief time, collecting my emotions, and responded with a soft “No, I am so very sorry.”

With her permission, we called her pastor and her husband’s priest, who arrived with a small bottle of holy water. And we waited. After what seemed like hours but actually was much less than that, her time came to deliver. A perfect little boy with paper-thin skin and eyes that would not open emerged from her body. He took his first and last breath while lying on her chest, which was heaving with cries. I closed my eyes, tears rolling down my face and waited for the placenta, while she and her husband said both hello and goodbye to their first son. The priest baptized the child, and we prayed together. My heart was heavy with helplessness.

As physicians, we are trained to heal, to help, to save. When the tools we have are not enough, the only ones that remain are those with which we were born and that make us human—compassion, empathy and caring. I have no way of knowing whether these things were enough for Leslie, as I have not seen her again, but they were all I had and everything I could give. MM

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