Morning rounds; Drilling for blood; Falx; Sciatica

Thomas Mampalam, MD

Morning rounds

I carry a list on morning rounds. Beside the name of each patient who goes home, I place a cross and for those who remain, a box. I like crosses better than boxes.

A cross for a motorcyclist who jackknifed into a power pole last week. A single burr hole, complete recovery.

Another cross for a mother of five. She feared cancer, but her tumor was benign. She has newfound joy to be alive.

A box for an old man without family, who waits for a hospice bed. Deadly glioblastoma multiforme.

A definite cross, a truck driver free of sciatica. He plans to retire and embark on a cruise to Alaska.

A box for an old woman who knows her time has come. A plum-sized tumor grows in her cerebellum.

A last box for a man who is paralyzed. Tumor strangles his spinal cord. Lung cancer widely metastasized.

Three crossed off the morning list. Three remain interred in open boxes, waiting for grass to cover their names, waiting for their crosses.

Drilling for blood

If you must drill a hole in someone’s skull to relieve pressure from expanding blood, then hold the drill shaft straight and firm at right angle to the calvarium.

You will not slip or plunge if you hold steady with the bit.
You got a midnight call:
a young man lost control,
crashed his motorcycle into a pole,
comatose with left pupil blown.

In front of his ear, make a vertical cut.
Retract the scalp, expose the temporal bone.
Make sure the drill is at top speed,
press it tight against the stone.

There will be a slight tremble in the drill
as it catches against the inner table.
Use a curette on the thin residual.
One step remains, cut the dura mater.

Under pressure, dark red clot oozes out
like the soft center of a cherry chocolate.

You will not slip or plunge if
you hold steady with the bit.

**Falx**

The turban bandage, a cloud on her head,
hides a scar that arcs from ear to ear.
She neglects her left-sided weakness and smiles.
"Was it cancer?" is her fear.

When I raised the bone flap, blood spurted like
a purple flame tossed up from the largest vein.
Two stitches stanched the flow but three liters lost.
Would the repair hold? Or would she bleed again?

I descended the vertical face of the falx
to a dim chamber beneath the sickle.
Three red rivers converged where I dared not cross.
Time to turn back before the world was lost.

In Mesopotamia, I glimpsed the threatening form
whose flesh was soft, gray, and cruciferous.
Further south, I hunted and found a bloodless plane
beneath which glistened a paler terrain.

Finally, in that dark cavern below the falx
there was no angelic echo before a storm,
only gently pulsating, sterile absence
of the dark and bloodied form.

I ascended to tell the story but need not tell all.
There is only one detail she wants to hear.
All the rest is mere embellishment.
"Was it cancer?" is her fear.

The tumor was benign, not cancer.
That is all she needs for now as answer.
You will live to a wrinkled old age, I say.
Your nurse will help you walk later today.
Sciatica

Three months ago, he stopped his truck route through the dusty Central Valley towns. Electric shocks coursed down his thighs. A disc herniation pinched a nerve root.

Yesterday, veins draped the disc like wild vines. With a blunt tipped probe, I expanded a tear in the ligament and then, with a grasper, gently tugged and twisted the fragment, like a gnarled carrot dug out of a vegetable garden, like a trophy to hold up high.

On morning rounds, he is free of sciatica. He talks about a spring trip to Alaska. From the window, we look across the bridge toward the cruise terminal. After I change his surgical dressing, we chat about the Inside Passage.

I recall my family’s trip six years ago: the orcas stalking the sea lions, the nesting eagles in the cedar trees and the ancient Hubbard glacier with blue fractal cliffs calving massive iceberg shards crashing into the ever pounding ocean spraying up like a fountain from below.
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