2021-2022 Golden Stethoscope Nomination

Nominated for: Outstanding Patient/Provider Communication

Name of Nominee Dr. Kelly Ferraro

Patients entering palliative care at a safety net hospital are the epitome of vulnerable. They are often unsure about their condition, their treatment options, how they will pay for their treatment, and where they will go once released. Perhaps most uncertain, however, is the future and what it holds for them. It is at this stage that effective listening and communication skills are absolutely imperative.

In one of my final precepting sessions, we visited with a cancer patient who was unable to communicate verbally. He also struggled communicating via writing. What was apparent, however, was the pain that the patient was in. Despite the communication barriers, Dr. Ferraro recognized he was in pain and afraid about his future. More importantly, she let him know that she knew and she would take care of him. By the end of the encounter, the patient's demeanor had changed. He felt heard, he felt cared for, and as a result I believe that he felt less fear about the future. I even saw him smile. This experience characterizes Dr. Ferraro's interactions with her patients.

Dr. Ferraro is an expert in clinical medicine and an expert in listening & communicating. In the later stages of life, the latter takes on extra importance. In the book Being Mortal, Dr. Atul Gawande writes that as physicians "sometimes we can offer a cure, sometimes only a salve, sometimes not even that. But whatever we can offer, our interventions, and the risks and sacrifices they entail, are justified only if they serve the larger aims of a person’s life." This is where Dr. Ferraro excels: fully listening to her patient's life story, motivations, desires, and hopes, and then using this information to communicate how the medical system can further the patient's life aims. She recognizes that merely prolonging life is not the end goal; how the patient lives in the end matters.

Written by: Robert Fuller

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