

Strength and Courage

By David Pineles

“Strength” and “courage” are words that stir up certain images in people’s minds. For me, it was an athlete in the midst of an important sporting event. It was a soldier fighting for his or her country. Never did I think it would be the image of a 30-something year old woman sitting in a dimly lit hospital room next to her son.

When I began my pediatrics clerkship, I quickly realized there was always more than one patient in the room. Whether it is a parent, sibling, aunt, or uncle, the pediatric patient is rarely alone. The goal of the physician is not only to treat the child but also to address the concerns and feelings of the child’s accompanying adult. Over the course of my six-week clerkship, I have met the spectrum of parents—from the overly concerned mother with a list of twenty questions to the apathetic immigrant grandparent who tells the child with a fever of 105°F, “It is no big deal.” I thought I had seen it all. But the one I will never forget was a seemingly unremarkable 30-something-year-old mother.

It was the first day of my two-week inpatient block, and the team I was assigned to was going on rounds at an ungodly hour. I was trying to manage my combination of tiredness, excitement, and an ounce of nervousness when the team stopped in front of patient X’s room. One of the interns piped up, “Patient X is a 23-month-old male with a history of Down syndrome here for induction chemotherapy for newly diagnosed acute myeloid leukemia.” I remember thinking to myself how awful it must be for the parent of patient X. Not only does your child have a lifelong debilitating disease but also now you must watch your not-even-2-year-old son receive chemotherapy for recently diagnosed cancer.

As our team filed into patient X’s room, one sterile white coat after the other, I prepared myself for the scene I thought I was about to see. However, to my pleasant surprise, my expectations could not have been more wrong. Bouncing up and down on the couch in the dimly lit room was a smiling little boy. One could hardly tell there was an IV attached to his arm, pumping toxic chemicals into his small, pale body. And sitting right next to this bouncing ball of energy was our protagonist. Before the attending physician even had the opportunity to introduce himself, she greeted everyone with a warm “good morning” and a pleasant smile. As the physician explained the plan for the treatment of her son, she listened attentively while intermittently patting and embracing her son. She never flinched at the words “chemotherapy,” “toxicity,” “side effects,” and “cancer.” She asked pertinent and direct questions when things were not clear, and she effortlessly put a positive spin on a dreadful situation.

As we wrapped up seeing patient X, our team began to file out of the room. However, before I could leave, she stopped me.

“Are you a student?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Good luck. I am sure you will be a great doctor.”

Although I only said “thank you,” I wanted to say more. I wanted to tell her how impressed I was with her attitude and overall outlook. I wanted to tell her that she was a great mother. Instead, I left the room, chasing the line of sterile white coats down the corridor.

I knew from then on, the words “strength” and “courage” would forever stir up one, and only one, image in my mind.

David Pineles is a third year medical student at the New York University School of Medicine. He is originally from New Jersey and has a passion for medicine. He is an avid sports fan, especially of the New York Rangers. He will be applying into internal medicine residency next year.