

Awake at 2 am

I tossed and turned one night and woke up to look at the time. Drat. It was only 2 am. It was warm and having slept on my back for too long despite the cool night air, I had to stir and flip onto my side. My frustrated flip flopping like a fish had awoken my poor spouse. I suddenly had a flashback to two years ago when I visited my patient who was in her 80s and had been felled by a stroke that left her paralysed on one side of her body. She lay in her bed at home when I visited, mute, because the stroke had taken away her speech as well. She looked impassive.

"Hey Mom, look who is here to visit you!" her daughter said enthusiastically. Suddenly she turned her back towards me to face the wall. I was taken aback thinking I had been slighted. Then using her good arm, she grabbed the railing of her bed to pull herself onto her side; I realised that she was just hot. Her back was hot, and she was trying to cool her back, just as I was trying to do at 2 am.

Imagine lying on a bed with a plastic sheet beneath in muggy Singapore weather! And that was two years ago. Presently she is in a nursing home, completely paralysed by her

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Text by Dr Tan Su-Ming

second stroke. I had visited her in the nursing home too.

Hot tears flowed down my face as I laid in my bed thinking, "How horrible, to feel hot and to have no physical ability to turn onto one's side by oneself." I prayed that her mind was taken too by now, or she would be aware of being a prisoner in her own body.

These are times when I feel like I might want to quit medicine because these kinds of things grieve me. But I don't think it is my time to do that yet. ♦

Old Acquaintance

Text by Dr Tan Su-Ming

When I saw the name of the new patient in the queue to see me, I smiled. I recognised it.

I hadn't seen Rick (not his real name) in close to 30 years.

Would he remember me from the many years ago when we attended the same church? Would he notice my name on the door and know it was me he was seeing today?

Rick had turned his life around years ago when he found Jesus Christ and left his life of doing drugs. He started a business of his own with the vocational skills he picked up during his time at the halfway house (for heroin addicts). I remember supporting him then when his business was fledgling.

Wow... so many years gone by. How was he now, I wondered. What was he here to see me for?

The door opened and Rick was accompanied in by another gentleman.

Time had been good to him. He still had a full head of dark hair and barely looked older than how I remembered him. His face was still handsome, but the puckish smile I remembered was gone. He looked tired and weary.

I learnt from the gentleman, who was his minder, that Rick was back in a halfway house for drug addicts.

It was a simple consult. Rick just had the common flu.

Rick could not recognise me at all. Because of the present COVID-19 pandemic, I had on a face mask that covered all but my eyes and I had a pair of goggles on top of that. All he could see were my eyes.

As he got up to leave, I felt tempted to take off my mask and goggles so

he could see my face, say to him, "Hey Rick, it's Su!" and hug him, or at least shake his hand.

But in this current climate, being tactile socially seemed like something to be avoided. I didn't know either, if Rick would have wanted me to see him like that now.

So, I just said, "Hey man, take care of yourself."

He did not respond, and was ushered out by his minder. Maybe if he comes back again. Maybe when this darn virus is no longer troublesome. ♦