



Everyday heroes

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A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.

Christopher Reeve

Among the many interesting and thought-provoking articles in this month's issue of *Canadian Family Physician*, the one that affected me most deeply was "Lysander. The nature of heroism" by Dr Ian Cameron from Dalhousie University in Halifax, NS (page 1148). This beautifully written story of the life of one of Dr Cameron's patients begins with the line "The medical history we seek and the past we get to know reveal the richness of our patients."

A hero can be many things: a mythological or legendary figure, often of divine descent, endowed with great strength or ability; an illustrious warrior; a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities; one who shows great courage; the principal male character in a literary or dramatic work; the central figure in an event or period; or an object of extreme admiration and devotion—an idol.¹

The literal meaning of the word *hero* is "protector," "defender," or "guardian," and etymologically it is thought to be cognate with the name of the Greek goddess Hera, the guardian of marriage.² In ancient Greek culture, classical hero cults were of great political importance, and heroes in myth often had close, although conflicted, relationships with the gods. For example, Heracles, whose name means "the glory of Hera," was tormented all his life by the queen of the gods.²

Since ancient times, many versions of the hero have come into being, ranging from heroes in folk tales (Paul Bunyan, for example), operatic heroes, and fictional heroes found in books and in movies to modern-day superheroes like Superman (and the super antihero, Spiderman). And a particular obsession with athletes during the past few decades has lately raised the sports star to hero status.

But the protagonist in "Lysander" could be any one of our patients. An everyman with an ordinary life who developed and managed ordinary illnesses. And also a man who acquired new skills late in life in order to look after his beloved spouse when she too became ill. A man who fought hard to keep his wife at home with him for as long as he could.

Matthew, the hero of "Lysander," is not a mythological or legendary figure, nor the central figure in an event or period, but rather a man of courage in the face of life's everyday struggles and heartrending losses, a man we admire both for his achievements and his noble qualities. There are many such patients in the lives of family physicians across the country.

As I read Dr Cameron's story, I was reminded of the "Matthews" in my own practice. One man, who I shall not forget, was a retired physician diagnosed with an aggressive form of prostate cancer in his early seventies. He was happily married and the father of 3 grown children, each with children of their own. He had enjoyed and was proud of his medical career, and was equally proud of his happy marriage and his children. He did not want aggressive treatment for his cancer, but just to be at home and to enjoy what time he had remaining. At first I saw him at home every week or two, but in his last days I visited him many times to make sure that he was comfortable. In spite of his grave illness he managed to comfort and reassure his already grieving family—and a young and inexperienced family physician eager to offer aggressive treatment—that he was content and ready for death and that no more need be done.

As family physicians, we are lucky to have such patients in our lives. "Lysander," and many of the other stories in our summer reading issue, reminds us to take time to explore the richness of our patients' lives and to allow their stories to enrich our own. 🌿

A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

References

1. Hero. In: *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Online; 2008. Available from: www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Hero. Accessed 2008 Jun 19.
2. Hero. In: *Wikipedia*. San Francisco, CA: Wikimedia Foundation Inc; 2008. Available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero>. Accessed 2008 Jun 19.



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