



Reflecting on the death of one of our own

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Medicine involves life and death, and we are trained to deal with the death of patients. Are we prepared to deal with the passing of a colleague, perhaps not realizing that we are not immune to death's call?

Not immune

Most doctors display type A personalities, aiming for perfection and disappointed with being second best. I'd prefer an A+ over the A, but death serves as a reminder that life is a gift in itself and we should not forget to be grateful for the things we have.

In medical school I felt on top of the world, pursuing my dream career. As we approached graduation, the main thought running through our minds was what specialty to pursue. But during my final year, a classmate of mine died after a jet-skiing accident, and my perspective shifted—for all our worries and cares of the world, the light had gone out for one of us. He was an international student who had left his loved ones to study medicine in another country. His parents must have been eagerly awaiting the day he would return as a doctor, and had probably planned festivities to honour him. Now they had to receive his lifeless body and prepare for his funeral.

Recently I also heard about 2 promising McMaster University medical students passing away in a car accident. I did not know either of them, but it was a reminder that in the midst of my youth, optimism, and accomplishment, death could occur anytime.

Mentor and friend

Dr David McCann was a noted family physician and disaster medicine specialist. He received many honours to recognize his work (including his team being recognized in the US President's report on Hurricane Katrina). David was one of my supervisors and mentors in family medicine at the Stonechurch Family Health Centre in Hamilton, Ont. His burly, more-than-6-foot-tall stature and his warm and commanding personality of telling it like it is aptly fit his role in disaster medicine. David was not my primary supervisor, but I developed and cherished a professional and personal relationship with him. We shared a number of common interests: family medicine, public health, and aerospace medicine.

Whenever you'd pass by David he'd smile back as if saying, "Hang in there; it's busy but you're doing a great job!"

One day at the clinic, when most of us had left for lunch (Fridays were dim sum outings for the team), David was still at his computer going over patient charts, and I was the only other person around following up on a laboratory result. David turned around and asked me, "Farhan, what do you want to do later in your career?"

I replied, "Pursue an international health opportunity later on."

He nodded and said, "Good, you should. I see you doing something big and don't settle for anything small."

That was wonderful and inspiring to hear, especially from someone who had achieved so much in international health. I was further honoured when David and 2 other family medicine mentors of mine, Dr Ainsley Moore and Dr Keyna Bracken, nominated me for the CFPC Family Medicine Resident Leadership Award. Around the same time, I had informed them that I was offered an appointment of Emerging Chair in the Department of Space Medicine at the International Space University. To which David replied:

Obviously the Space Program recognizes in you what the 3 of us who nominated you for the Leadership Award see—you are a born leader with great things ahead. It has been a privilege working with you and I wish you much success in your Ad Astra trajectory. Give us a call when you are on the ISS [International Space Station]—I'll accept the collect charges!

Hearing the news

It was the last day of my full-time rotation, and I walked in the clinic looking forward to the day. From the shocked expressions of the staff I knew something was wrong. I was told David was seriously ill. It was hard to swallow: a person who had done so much—been to countless disasters, earthquakes, and hurricanes—and had come back from it all, was terminally ill?

Strong till the end

David's passing was hard to comprehend, not only for me but for all who knew him. Perhaps what made it bearable for us to go through was David himself. Following the news, he was very positive through it all; his faith and family supported him and made him stronger, which in turn made us stronger. I last met him at his home a month before his passing. He was the same emotionally strong David McCann I knew. We chatted and prayed together. A resident friend, Augie, said a prayer according to his and David's Catholic faith; David then asked me to say a prayer from my faith, Islam.

Take the time

Before learning of David's illness, I had heard about an award that befitted his achievements. The nomination process did not open for 8 months, but I immediately contacted David's colleagues and residents suggesting we make the nomination. Within a few days I received several letters of support, and the nomination package was all set to submit when the time came. Unfortunately it never did. David passed away 4 months before the nomination process opened.

My eagerness to nominate him in order to honour a mentor and friend now left a void within me, as if I had missed the opportunity to thank him and have him recognized while he was alive. I still think about submitting the nomination posthumously. Perhaps I will, to honour

his memory, but it does not feel the same not having him around to receive the award.

I am glad and fortunate that I told David before his passing about the nomination plan and shared with him the letters of support showing the high regard others held him in. David was pleased just seeing the letters and hearing about the nomination plan, which mattered more to him than receiving the actual award. We must always seize the moment to acknowledge and appreciate everyone and everything around us, not leaving anything for tomorrow. Tomorrow might never come. 🍁

Dr Asrar is a resident in the Public Health and Preventive Medicine and Family Medicine residency programs at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont.

Competing interests

None declared

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