

A letter for the road ahead

by Cheryl Leung MD CCFP

I remember the first time I met your husband. I remember his wide and easy smile, his warm eyes expressing the optimism of having graduated from his recent stay at the spinal cord injury rehab unit. He walked more surely then - with a walker - having practiced transfers between his bed to bathroom to his wheelchair.

He told me at our first meeting of his hope to get better, scarcely mentioning the words which came highlighted in his admission package: *"metastatic cancer with spinal cord compression; treated with surgical decompression and radiation"*. Between his review of systems dotted with "no's", he told me in English better than I expected, of his roommate waiting back for him at his apartment. He told me fondly of his homeland in Ethiopia. He clarified further for me that his wife and two boys were now residing in nearby Kenya.

He was feeling well then and, consequently, harder to find, spending his days off the unit as I would have too, independent in his power chair. In time he told me that he often visited the elementary school next door, watching from the sidewalk as the kids played soccer during recess. He told me that they reminded him of his sons - they too loved soccer.

In the fall, his leg weakness returned. This time, his strength wasn't so quick to come back as it had the first time. His return from our local acute care hospital was quick too, but this time with no further treatment available. Still, his cancer showed good response from his chemotherapy so he remained hopeful. He was now more often in bed, and kept watch on the soccer fields from our fifth floor window. He always had his box of dates to snack on, and phone nearby. He asked me to call, his immigration lawyer: it was always foremost in his mind to bring you and your boys to Canada to be with him.

We chatted more over those following weeks. When one of your sons entered boarding school, he told me wistfully how he had less opportunity to speak to them. I encouraged him to write letters, or maybe by special request, the school administrators would allow a phone call with their father once a week? On my next visit, he was delighted to share the good news that he had been approved to have a weekly Friday phone call. We explored whether we could help him to find a new accessible apartment in the suburbs, close to a mosque and Ethiopian community he could call home. But by then I could see he had made our regular nursing staff his community, at least for now.

When he became sicker, our conversations shifted instead to his chest discomfort, his fatigue, or his worrisome lab results. Still, he reminded me that no matter what happened to him he trusted in Allah. He told me he still prayed five times daily, not so much for himself, but for those many others who were suffering during a pandemic. I sensed a shift in his focus then, with his limited energy, as he narrowed his mind solely and squarely on his upcoming immigration hearings. He always expressed hope that his refugee claim would be approved, allowing him to be reunited with his family.

The last time I saw your husband, I knew from his breathing and his slowed speech that he didn't have much time left to live. I saw his warm eyes, now fixed stoically, as he confirmed his decision to fight for every last hour possible always, with his goal to have you and his sons by his side. After all, his refugee hearing was tomorrow, after months of delay. It was then that he finally gave me permission to tell you this grave news. I helped him steady his hands as we searched for your name on his phone. I wish it had been under better circumstances, in person, to comfort you as you wept, rather than on a video call. I wish most of all, that he hadn't died the very next day, on the day that his refugee claim was finally approved.

I wish I could have done more for him, and given more time to him, to you, to bring you together. I know I won't see your husband again on my regular rounds now. I don't know if I will have opportunity to meet you again

though perhaps that day will come when you can come to Canada as well. But I want you to know that in my every visit with him, even to the end, he was unwavering. His vision was fixed forward, looking ahead to a better future for you and your sons. I hope you can, with time, see the same too.

Yours very sincerely,

His attending physician

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