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Earth Suit


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REFLECTION: Earth suit

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Physician burnout is common. Symptoms include exhaustion (both physical and emotional), depersonalization, and loss of purpose. Often we assume it occurs after years of practicing medicine. Surprisingly for us, we experienced “burnout” during our one-month in-patient medicine rotation. Our team was barely keeping afloat; we felt defeated after a patient passed away followed by a seemingly endless series of admissions for end-stage chronic disease patients.

On one particular day, as a patient’s family debated the decision between a hospice or a percutaneous enteral gastrostomy (PEG) tube, our attending handed us a Cochrane review article titled “Enteral tube feeding for older people with advanced dementia” that stated “There is insufficient evidence to suggest that enteral tube feeding is beneficial in patients with advanced dementia”. As we placed the order for a general surgery consult for a PEG tube, we felt disillusioned with medicine, wondering whether the decisions we made prolonged life or merely prolonged the process of dying. Our inability to put evidence into practice only reinforced our sense of helplessness.

In the midst of this overwhelming month, we had the privilege of caring for a pleasant 83-year-old woman who was diagnosed with a pancreatic mass while on our service. She was atypical because of her cheery disposition and boundless energy. She seemed so full of life. She briefly shared her life story, recounted how she lived a full life, and then proceeded to recite a poem she wrote, “Earth suit,” for our team during rounds:

Mrs. Antieau’s poem changed the morale of our team. “Earth suit” addressed our internal struggles to acknowledge the limitations of medical practice, celebrate life, and respect the process of dying. Medical journals give us data points and facts, but it was Mrs. Antieau’s poem that inspired us to practice medicine with a sound heart. As training physicians, valuable clinical experiences such as these renew our passion for medicine, and allow us to become better physicians to care for our patients’ “earth suits.”

Earth Suit

Jenette Antieau

When God first made man,
For him to do well,
To live on this planet,
He needed a shell.

The soul must be sheltered
It can’t simply roam,
The spirit as well
They both need a home.

So God gave us bodies
With legs and with arms,
Lots of muscles and bones
To keep us from harm.

We need tendons and organs,
And blood flow to boot,
So in fact what God gave us
Was our own personal “earth suit.”

This suit is temporary
It’s not made to last
Unlike our spirit and soul,
It will end in a cask.

My “suit” is now old
From that I can’t hide
But my “suit” is not me;
I’m just hitching a ride.

Dr. BOWHEE GWAK is a third year resident and Dr. YOUNG PARK is a second year resident at Beaumont Health Annapolis Family Medicine Residency. “Earth Suit” copyright © Jenette Antieau; poem and personal information incorporated by permission of the author.



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