The operated surgeon

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The operated emergency surgeon – a personal experience for physical and moral catharsis or just another case of statistical value.

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The reasons for writing these lines are three – the public lecture I have presented for my associate professors' election last May, the operation for a gangrenous appendicitis I underwent 11 days after that and my recent visit to Jerusalem.

The lecture

Preparing the lecture "Patient – Surgeon Relationship – Confrontation or Collaboration?" with 277 slides, I left 182 for the surgeon, concerning career, management, leadership, family, burn-out, surgical competences, errors, complications, knowledge, communication skills, creativeness and wisdom. For the interpersonal relations-types of and analysis of healthcare models, consultation styles there were 70 slides and only 25 were left for quality of life and patient safety. I missed post-operative pain control, anxiety and ERAS, satisfied with the deep dissection of the most common personal problems of the surgeon.

The case, operation and postoperative period

Ten days after the lecture presentation I felt severe, constant upper abdominal pain, with vomiting and lack of defecation. After a night on infusions in my surgical ward I went home with less pain moved in the lower abdomen. When it turned to the right at noon and self-palpation was painful, I went back to the hospital and said to my colleagues – here I am with an acute appendicitis for operation. The finding was gangrenous appendicitis with local peritonitis, for which appendectomy, lavage and drainage were performed. Waking up I tried to convince the personal I feel good, especially after pain killers. After midnight, I have to stand up alone and go to the toilet for 3 times which caused me enormous effort and unbelievable pain. On the next day I went around in the room, had flatus, changed dressing, started to drink and eat. The 2nd day went better and on the 3-rd postoperative day, the abdominal drain was taken off and I went home. Two days later the abdominal wall drain was taken off, I went out for a walk on the hill near my house and on the 7th day the skin sutures were taken off.

The insight

You will say –"a perfect recovery" – "yes", I will agree, except for the suppressed pain and little disappointment from people, I have known from several decades, whom I have helped, trusted and treated as my friends. I could hardly believe and realize that some of them, being in the ward, did not come at all, even for once, just to say "hello". When I was walking slowly

around the hospital, almost everyone who met me asked first “What did happen” and then “Why did not you call me?” If I was not entering my 60-th year, these days, I would say -”ok, carry on”, but now, I understand times have become really “hard enough”. I do not blame anyone. Self-interest, disrespect and greediness have displaced good old belief of honesty, sincerity, tenderness and trust.

The physical catharsis

The high loaded surgeons, can hardly ever imagine they can take the place of the patients they operate. But if by chance, this suddenly happens, they will inevitably realize that they are men, like all the others with harmful body, which they will never forget in the future. Even though they feel fit enough, everyone around will say – “Ok, you are elderly man after all, what do you expect?” Here you have choices and must take decisions. Will you count on others any more, or rather trust on yourself and family and keep on with any kind of sports you prefer. These will give you the energy and capacity to continue to be a surgeon and the person of your own, but in fact, you need to slow down a little a bit after you are 60, in order to carry on longer.

The moral catharsis

As a consultant surgeon, now that you have lived as and felt like a patient for a week after your operation, you can really understand two things, you have suffered - the pain and the disregard. Although the second issue is not so somatically felt like pain, it over-whelms your mind with the surprise, suddenness and disappointment of a friend’s betrayal. Did I really was so naive, blind optimist throughout these 30 years or did it change so fast that I did not recognize it? None of both. Continue to be open, honest and generous, but more distant, cool minded and less trusted. Assess the moral and physical catharsis that you have been through, not as a statistically significant value, but as a destiny’s sign for the right way at ones life’s crossroad and better patient understanding.

The surgical wisdom and creativeness

What had happened? This is the signal of age and destiny – accept it realistically and philosophically. It is not a fatal disaster but it is sign, you should remember. Having already acquired the 5 components of surgical wisdom, formulated by Gruen R. & al. /competence and professionalism, superior judgment, rich understanding, few unjustified beliefs, strong moral compass/ you have become a wise surgeon. But there is something to add. As an operated surgeon, being personally on both sides, you have the opportunity to become an expert in patient-surgeon relationship. It is more for bad, to discover how unexpectedly different is it from patients’ side, than to explore the case as a surgeon. Use this opportunity for the rest of your practice, remember the pain and disappointment and when you start your next operation, don’t forget that you have already lied down on this table before like a patient.

The reconsideration

When you have visited the most holy place worldwide - the Grave of Jesus, you might start to look on the world and think of people in a different way. You may realize that everything is ephemeral – your work, your life, even you, as everyone else. So why don’t you try to be more good willed, opened and spread more empathy to people in the years left in your life. Just remember that humans phonetically and phraseologically are tuned to good. We begin the day with good morning, greet each other with good day and good evening and part with good night. The good physician and surgeon must be or try to reconsider himself as a good man.