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Subject: What Is It Like for Sam to Witness the Death of a Patient?



WITNESSING THE FIRST DEATH



At some point, every medical trainee experiences the death of a patient, which is often a very difficult experience.

WHAT IS WITNESSING THE FIRST DEATH?

Physicians spend much of their time and energy trying to extend and improve lives, but death is an inevitable fact of life, one which all medical student face in the course of their training. Just like studying anatomy is an important rite of passage for first year medical students, the first patient death is a common rite of passage for third year medical students on clinical rotations. For some students, this experience may occur on their first day of clinical rotations. For others it may not happen until later in the year. There are many possible scenarios that end with a patient's death. Some students will watch an elderly patient dying peacefully with excellent hospice care, in a quiet room, surrounded by loving

family. Other students will witness the organized but frenetic chaos of an emergency medicine team desperately trying to save the life of a motor vehicle crash victim, employing violent means to try and save a life that is violently cut short.

The first death is a massively educational experience for medical students, teaching them things that lectures cannot. Students will be able to see how veteran physicians handle the stress of a spiraling situation and when and how they realize that a patient is beyond their ability to help; how they perform a final confirmatory physical exam; how they break the unwelcome news to loved ones and support them during the intense initial grief; and how they cope with their own feelings about death and about the role they played in the patient's death.

HOW DO STUDENTS RESPOND TO WITNESSING THE FIRST DEATH?

Just as we all grieve differently, medical students respond to this first witnessed death with a broad range of reactions. The specific reaction that a student has depends on many factors, including the student's experience with death and attitude toward it, the emotional connection the student had to the patient in question, how long the student has been in the clinical setting, the setting and the manner in which the death happened, whether the death was expected, the age of the patient, and whether the death was difficult or peaceful. These factors combine to yield an emotional reaction that a student may or may not expect.

The range of reactions students may or may not feel when witnessing their first death includes sadness, grief, shock, confusion, surprise, anger, dullness, withdrawal, or lack of emotion. Students most commonly feel sadness. When students are on an inpatient service (such as post-operative or the intensive care unit), they usually get to know the patient and their family over the course of a few days, which can make the death harder to process. The student may feel guilty or embarrassed about feeling sad or unsure about how to console the family. Other students may feel withdrawn from the situation, as if they are watching a movie, not real life, especially when their contact with the patient is very brief. This often happens in the setting of an ER (emergency room) trauma bay, where 10 people might be struggling at a moment's notice to save someone's life. The death is sudden; the patient dies as quickly as they came into the hospital.

Students also have a broad range of experiences in terms of their opportunity to process their experience of the death. In some cases, the entire team might meet to discuss what happened, and this discussion may or may not include a discussion of everyone's emotions. In other cases, a more senior member of the team may approach the student, ask how the student feels, and perhaps offer some words of advice. There are also times when it seems as though everyone ignores the death that just happened, quickly moving on to the next task and the next patient (and processing the experience more privately).

HOW CAN I SUPPORT SAM REGARDING HER FIRST WITNESSING OF A DEATH?

- When Sam tells you that one of her patients died, slow down. Help Sam slow down and process the experience, if she is willing.
- Sam's experience of witnessing a death can be profound, especially if she has not witnessed much death in the past. Processing her emotions is an important part of being a professional, as a way of keeping herself healthy and remaining connected to the human side of herself. Encourage Sam to process the death with the many resources at her disposal, including:
 - You
 - Other loved ones
 - Sam's peers
 - Senior members of Sam's team that she feels comfortable approaching
 - A trusted academic mentor or advisor
 - A professional counselor at the school's counseling center
 - Journaling and other creative activities
- Remember Sam may have developed an emotional connection to this patient. Listen and talk sensitively, and do not assume that Sam is "clinically detached" from the experience.
- Accept Sam's feelings, even if they are not what you expect. Sam's experience will change over time. Processing a death can take many paths and include many stages.
- Here are some questions you can ask Sam when she tells you one of her patients died:
 - What was your relationship with the patient?
 - What was the death like?
 - How did you feel before the death, when you realized the patient was dying, and after the patient died? What thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations do you remember?
 - What happened after the death? What did you do, and what did other people do?
 - What have you been thinking and feeling about the death?
 - How did others react to the death?
- Check on Sam several days after the death, to see how she is. In the next few times you talk, do not be shy about asking Sam how she has been feeling with regards to the death she witnessed.
- Send Sam an encouraging pick-me-up, such as a card, flowers, or candy.

LEARN MORE ABOUT EXPERIENCING PATIENT DEATH

- [Medical Student Perspective: Two Deaths in Two Weeks](#) / American College of Physicians
- [When a Patient is Ready to Talk About Death, but a Medical Student is Not](#) / Scientific American
- [A Medical Student Becomes Acquainted with Death](#) / CMAJ Blogs
- [A Med Student's First Experience with the Death of a Patient](#) / My Health Career