

Cure Ironic

Recently, a patient whom I had not seen in 4 years, Mr. Jones, called me at my office. I received his call with some apprehension since former patients seldom track you down with good news.

I first met Mr. Jones 7 years ago when I was an intern and he had been admitted to the hospital with cellulitis of his left leg and uncontrolled diabetes. He was 48 years old, 5 ft 10 in, and weighed 268 lb. Mr. Jones had been diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 43 years and was 226 lb at that time. After failing to control his diabetes through diet, he reluctantly agreed to initiate oral diabetes medications, which did not control his glucose levels. Two years prior to his hospitalization, he was started on insulin, which did not regulate his glucose levels. Mr. Jones was also diagnosed with hypertension, which added more drugs to his medication list.

During my first encounter with Mr. Jones, he told me he had always been “on the healthy side” weight-wise. He had attempted both diet and exercise to lose weight but was unsuccessful. Depression and arthritis soon followed and then the cellulitis. Mr. Jones was exasperated with his medical problems and his failed attempts at weight loss. I counselled him about the metabolic syndrome, stressing the importance of counting calories as well as monitoring his fat and carbohydrate intake. I also suggested swimming if his arthritis prevented him from participating in other physical activity.

Mr. Jones meticulously followed-up with me in the clinic. I called him at home to make sure that he was adhering to his health regimen. He attempted to restrict his caloric and fat intake, but his weight increased to 274 lb. He inquired about bariatric surgery for his obesity, but I told him that he did not qualify for such surgery yet.

After 2 years of follow-up, Mr. Jones told me one day, “Doc, I have good news for you. My weight is down to 270 lb.” He continued to lose weight and in 8 months he weighed 233 lb. His hypertension was now controlled without medications and his diabetes had improved dramatically. Mr. Jones stated that he felt well with little fatigue. I told him that as he lost weight, his exercise tolerance would improve and that he would feel revitalized.

The next month, Mr. Jones made an unscheduled

visit to the clinic. He weighed 227 lb and reported feeling weak and nauseous with no appetite. I reassured him that this was just a phase in his weight loss program and that he would get better. He insisted that something was wrong, so I scheduled an upper GI endoscopy. The gastroenterologist told me that Mr. Jones had a mass lesion in his stomach and needed to be admitted for work-up and surgery. I collapsed in the nearest available chair thinking, “Was the weight loss just an effect of the stomach cancer that he had all along? Did I do any good to this guy who has trusted me for so long?”

Mr. Jones was hospitalized and diagnosed with an early form of stomach cancer, for which he had a subtotal gastrectomy with gastrojejunostomy. On his second postoperative day, I gathered enough courage to see him. I wished him a speedy recovery and apologized for not suspecting the diagnosis earlier. While chatting, I mentioned that I would be finishing my residency and leaving the city. Before I left, he said, “Doc, I really appreciate the care that you have given me.” I met Mr. Jones for the last time in the medical clinic shortly after his surgery, and he was doing well.

When Mr. Jones called 4 years later, I did not know what to expect.

He said, “Doc, how are you doing? It was hard to track you down.”

I replied, “I’m fine. How are you doing?”

In good spirits, he said, “Doc, I want to thank you for the care you gave me. I am now 176 lb; take no pills; have no diabetes, hypertension, or arthritis. And you know what, I really enjoy swimming.”

I asked, “How is your cancer and how have you been doing postsurgery?”

He said, “Doc, that’s the best part. The surgery that I had was effectively a great bariatric surgery. It cured me of both the cancer and the obesity in one shot.”

What I missed could have killed him. Instead, it cured him.

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