

A Final Telephone Call

In the Telemetry Unit

I was a 34-year-old medical intern at a county medical center assigned to the telemetry unit. I recall one patient in particular, a seriously ill elderly woman who had had several myocardial infarctions in the past. At exactly 2:30 AM early one morning when I was on call by myself, the nurses woke me from a deep sleep announcing that this patient had ventricular fibrillation. In such situations, I hit the ground running, called a code, and led everyone into action.

Unfortunately, the patient had gone into ventricular fibrillation while seated on the toilet. She was slumped over. Because it was a small bathroom, we had to carry her out of there and place her on the floor, where we started performing cardiovascular resuscitation without much success. When it became clear that she could not be resuscitated, she was pronounced dead. I was left with the task of notifying the family.

I remember sitting at my desk debating whether I should make such a call at that early hour. I had met the woman's daughter several times; she was the only child, the only immediate family. It seemed unkind to

call her so early, given that there was nothing she or anyone else could do to change the situation. All I would accomplish would be to wake her up, tell her the awful news, and probably prevent her from going back to sleep. I decided to let her sleep for a few more hours. I wasn't going anywhere. The patient wasn't going anywhere. The funeral director could come later.

So I waited until close to 6:30 AM to call her with the news. Aware of her mother's deteriorating health, she certainly was not surprised but was still upset. Suddenly, she asked me if I had called her earlier. After I told her no, she said her telephone had rung at 2:30 AM, but when she picked up the receiver, no one was on the other end. Hearing that gave me chills and I shuddered; I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I gave her my apologies, trying to avoid any discussion of the telephone call, because I found it so eerie. Although we did not discuss it further, I never forgot it.

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