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## The *Most* We Can Do

In the minds of many people, emergency medicine tends to focus more on identifying and treating the immediate clinical needs of patients, rather than trying to address the “big picture.” Last month, *EMERGENCY MEDICINE* reprinted my March 2007 editorial, “The Least We Can Do,” which had grown out of a complaint from a colleague about an early morning visit to our ED. Although he had received excellent clinical care, he was frustrated and unhappy with some of the of doctors and nurses who walked by his stretcher without stopping to inquire about his concerns or answer his questions.

The following “guest editorial” is excerpted with permission from a letter we received from MJE, who accompanied his mother to our ED recently after she experienced a syncopal episode. I think you’ll agree that the account offered by MJE encompasses what the specialty of emergency medicine truly strives to be.

This past Sunday afternoon... my 93-year-old mother...and I were visiting my son...[when] she had an episode of syncope.... We were in a tough situation...in the middle of an unfamiliar city... and felt pretty overwhelmed. The situation was even tougher be-

cause my mother has advanced pancreatic cancer and is in hospice care so we [didn’t] want any heroic measures taken. This, of course, put all of us—including your staff—in an awkward position that required careful thinking outside the box: what care was really necessary and why.

I don’t have to tell you that your emergency room is a busy place, [so] I was truly astonished at how much thought and care went into my mother’s treatment. Decisions were carefully thought through and explained. Most amazingly, when things became complicated in terms of whether to order a CT scan of the brain under these conditions, and I expressed my concern about whether we could catch our train back...that night so my mother could feel safe in her own home, they genuinely cared. This I did not expect.... [With] an emergency room full of patients to tend to [I did not think] our concerns about catching a train... would merit any attention....

I was amazed when the resident asked his attending...to weigh in on some of these decisions.... [The attending] listened carefully to our concerns, explained his, and then personally wheeled my mother’s bed over to the CT scan and to X-ray

and helped coordinate between them, so that we had a chance at getting the evaluation done in time to catch our train. Everyone was incredibly efficient and respectful despite having their hands quite full. The resident was a standout:...kind, respectful, [using] gentle humor to put my mother at ease while quickly getting to the bottom of the possible causes for the syncope and helping us figure out what someone with end-stage cancer should do in a situation like this. The end result was my mother was able to get safely home to her own bed with all of our minds at ease.

Unfortunately, we live at a time in our culture where most “consumers” feel entitled to instant access to doctors who can magically remove all suffering without their having to wait any longer than they would for a hamburger. Anything short of that meets only with complaints, if not lawsuits. I am guessing that when your department does everything right you usually don’t hear a thing. I did not want this to be one of those times. [The attending] and his resident really stand out as fine doctors and fine human beings.... I know I speak for many more who simply can’t or won’t take the time to write. **EM**