

Behind death

It was just one of the busy nights in the E.R. during my residency training. Following the horn of an ambulance, an ambulance stretcher came in with an old man whose face was gray. “A 68-year-old male, unconscious suddenly about ten minutes ago. After CPR on the spot, still no respiration, no pulse.” The doctor from the ambulance routinely reported, while the nurses moved the man onto the medical bed well-equipped with respirator and monitors. After my superior checked the status of the patient, we were ready to conduct trachea cannulation and CPR following the guideline. Everyone was thinking of the word “death”, but nobody spoke it. Generally, we doctors cannot declare clinical death until we have done everything we can. For this patient with no respiration and no pulse for more than ten minutes, this was no exception.

“Doctor, that’s ... just... not necessary,” murmured a middle-aged man, the son of the patient, with tears on his face. His voice was trembling, “Father just chose that way to leave us. Seconds before that, we were still happy all together”. He sobbed and added, “He had no pain, I believe, and we would rather let him go peacefully”.

With the son’s asking for us to stop, we halted our rescue procedures. And I was sent to prepare documents reporting the death. During this time, some of the relatives came in and out, then back with a new suit and a pair of shoes. Just like a quiet ceremony, the son wiped the body slowly and quietly, and then did up the buttons softly one by one. With a new suit on, the old man was just lying there with a gray face and no expression on his face. “It is just... just too fast, we just weren’t prepared for it”, the son uttered, “It was just one of the usual days, my father picked up my daughter from the kindergarten for dinner together with the whole family. After that, we went for a walk. Then he suddenly fell down... And... and he never got up again. We still cannot believe that the fall would be our farewell”. The son lowered his head and murmured again and again. About ten minutes later, men from mortuary walked in with a big case, with that heavy metal sound as the case closed, the whole ceremony ended, from life to death, from together to apart. “We all thought father was in good health. He had taken many family responsibilities and seldom complained about anything. Maybe we didn’t take care of him enough, at least, maybe we should have spent more time with him”. The son kept his murmuring.

The scene like that above happens in the E.R. at times. I often asked myself what I would choose if death happened to one of my family members, or dear friends, holding the hope that a miracle could happen or just letting him or her go with dignity and peace. What the better choice is, no one can tell without hesitation.

My grandmother left us during the first year when I started to work in the hospital. During the third time she was admitted to the ICU, all the family members came up and decided to give up therapies. My parents said, “Grandmother feels tired, we should let her go in peace”.

In the E.R., like the old man and like my grandmother, death happens nearly each and every day. Lots of families face decisions at that time. Life is always the largest fortune for everyone, and love is the most beautiful thing that every family treasures. Most of the families believe that love equals life and love would no longer exist when life terminates. However, they neglect the fact that every life has a natural end, just like every play has to ring down the curtain. Each time when I was standing outside the Rescue Room, the question lingered around me, “Are we obliged to help our patients live a better life or to prolong their life that they do not wish us to do?”. I still remember the words the son said before he walked out of the Rescue Room, “Thank you doctor, father left us without any pain”.

My grandmother is still the person I love my whole life long. Every time when I remember I spent a lot of joyful time when she was alive and healthy, I never felt guilty for not holding her for more time. I feel love from her is still around me. I still believe that behind death there is a deeper love and hope for life instead of darkness and fear.

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