Introduction: I am writing a quick piece this week on the heels of our Grand Rounds on Homeless Health. Perhaps this reflection will further deepen the lessons about caring for those living outside. I know I learn something new every day.

Acts of Kindness

By Hugh Silk

I was recently struck by an act of kindness by a colleague of mine. With our homeless health work, we all work very closely together and rely on one another. I would say that on any given day, one of my colleagues does something to bend over backwards to meet someone where they are. However, this act seemed above and beyond, and really quite kind.

A patient of ours had ended up in the hospital after an overdose. The patient was in the ICU, and it was clear they were going to be there for a little while. Easter was coming and they were determined to see their children.

"All I want is to give my three children their Easter baskets."

This is a patient who does not live with her children because of being homeless. She lives in a tent with her partner. However, her connection to her children remains strong. This certainly put the patient at high risk to leave the hospital.
I contacted the street outreach worker that I do street rounds with and explained the situation. He made it seem like the solution was easy. He drove over to a store after talking to the patient to get details, and bought three Easter baskets, filled it with the things that the children would like and went to the ICU to drop them off.

Wow I thought that was dedication. That is patient-centered care. That is kindness and love.

Unfortunately, she still left the hospital the day before Easter to be with her children. One can completely understand why. It was not going to be the same to have her children visit her in the ICU even with the baskets. But the act of kindness remained. I am sure they still received the nice baskets; we just did not keep in her care. I am still in awe.

Later in the week I tried to replicate a minor version of the act of kindness, having been inspired by my colleague. It was with a patient of ours that we had seen on the side of the road signing to make money. We had been looking for her for a while; she had an appointment at the hospital three hours later for a diagnostic testing. We had actually been looking for her for three weeks but due to the recent sweeps by the city to take down people's tents we could not find her. Now out of the blue, here she was. We were very worried she was going to miss this important diagnostic test. She had no way to get there, but agreed after we offered to drive her that she would go. My colleague was not going to be able to make it, so I said, "No problem. I'll come back in two hours and pick her up and give her a lift."

I returned to the street corner where she had been signing. She did not look as well. She explained that she could no longer go because she had to make enough money to be able to buy some more fentanyl. I pleaded with her, I asked if there was anything I could do or offer; I did whatever I could to try to convince her. It was just physically impossible for her to go to the appointment at that time. I called the hospital and canceled her appointment so it would not be seen as a "no-show". We will try again.

I learned a lot about why patients who are homeless and have substance use disorders miss their appointments or leave the hospital, as we say, "against medical advice". Dr. Garcia talks about experimental mice neglecting their young to get more opioids in lab research - the chemical dependency being so strong. If a mouse will neglect her baby, of course a person will skip an appointment. In the former situation, she just wanted to have some normal mom time with her kids.

I was thinking about something former Supreme Court Justice Breyer said during a talk recently. If you go all out at your work and give your all, maybe you will get a promotion or you will win an award. And if not, you still went all out and did a great job. And you
have that. The acts of kindness still stand. And the realization that we have a long way to go to meet patients with the exact needs that they have.

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