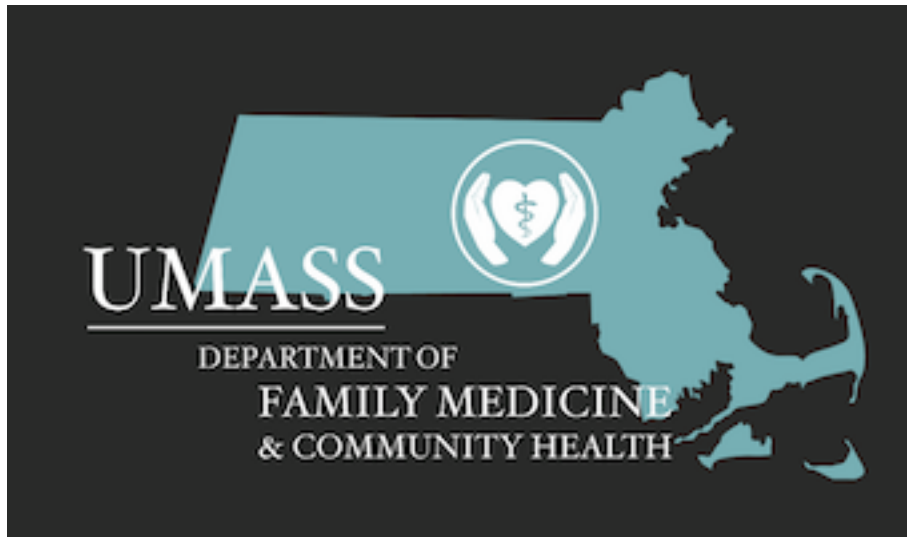


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I wish I could do more

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Family Medicine Moments

March 30, 2023

Introduction: This week we hear from Paul Daniel, a hospitalist in our department, and someone who leads teams to provide care in Haiti. Through his reflection he shares with us a feeling that no doubt many readers will identify with. That feeling of questioning if you are doing enough. It becomes particularly true when you interact with patients that you may never see again. See what Dr. Daniel has to say about this.

I wish I could do more

By Paul Daniel

"I wish I could do more."

There were at least 30 people waiting outside. Sweating in the hot Caribbean sun, and likely 25 more standing in line inside the cramped four walls of the 5-room clinic in Southeastern Haiti. Normally I could hear all the voices of patients. Some children crying, some playing, adults singing, and others exchanging stories of being sick for months. I would do my best to see them comprehensively but quickly because I know they've been waiting for hours to see our team of healthcare providers. But time seemed to stand still with this one patient. I didn't hear anyone else in the hallways. It was just me and her. The look of concern on her face and her story caught my attention. And the words coming from her mouth made me worried...

"I've been losing weight....feeling tired....I have a lump in my breast."

My thoughts could only go in one direction, and a bedside ultrasound we performed only worsened my fears.

"What is it" she asked.

"I'm not 100% sure" ...but I'm concerned for a cyst...or even possibly a cancer"

"Cancer? but isn't that for old people?"

At this point panic was starting to set-in... for both of us. I knew she needed a formal ultrasound, a biopsy, and more...but how? She, like the rest, didn't have money to travel or pay for the testing and consult. My mind started thinking about how to do more...

"Well, I could bring her to the US. I could get her health insurance, get her established with a good PCP, if she needed to be hospitalized, we could do that too!"

But then I looked in her eyes and reality set in...for both of us again. In a few days this mobile clinic would be over, and I would be back in the US with all the technological advances. And she would be here still wondering "What is it?" I left her with the most realistic plan I could think of. I told her what my concerns were and if she had the means, what to do.

That was 6 months ago, and I just came back from Haiti, two weeks ago...I looked for her but didn't see her. Asked about her, but no one had heard anything. And it haunts me, tears at my soul.

I see a lot of patients on these medical mission trips to Haiti. We treat a lot of illness and have many success stories of people who got better and are doing better. But for the handful that our team can't help, it's heartbreaking. Because I always "wish I could do more."

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