

### How much longer do I have?

The receptionist walks into the clinic charting area, sighing, "The ambulance just dropped him off. He isn't scheduled for an appointment today. We aren't allowed to see patients admitted from other hospitals in our outpatient cancer clinic." She tosses the patient's chart on my growing pile. I peek around the corner at the waiting room. It is standing-room only now, and we are already an hour behind schedule.

I start flipping through the chart...*admitted for six weeks in a rural hospital on intravenous nutrition... the doctors have been trying to contact us for help...* I never heard of a rural hospital trying to contact our cancer surgery team about this patient.

*A new diagnosis of stomach cancer... cannot eat because of the cancer...suspect it has spread...* All clues point to a dismal prognosis, similar to the many others who are outside the limits of our scientific understanding or have fallen through the cracks of our healthcare system.

I knock on his clinic room door.

As I open it, my gaze is drawn to his large, sunken eyes. He is only skin and bones at this point. The cancer is using his energy to grow before he can use it to live. He promises he has always taken good care of himself and followed the advice of his doctors. He feels responsible for his diagnosis, but there is nothing he could have done differently to prevent this. This was completely out of his control.

I explain that his cancer is **bad luck**. In this case, "bad luck" is a euphemism for the limits of our scientific understanding and of the healthcare system we have today. I leave a moment of silence, waiting to see if he is one of the many who try to lighten the mood by suggesting they try their luck in the lottery. I can tell that he really dislikes attributing anything to randomness and is searching high and low for a cause.

We spent the next 30 minutes discussing how we could help him. I suggest we admit him to our hospital so he can receive care from stomach cancer specialists. I don't think we will be able to cure him, but I would like to get him eating again and home to his family as soon as possible.

Of all the possible things someone could wish for at the end of life, many only want to eat their favorite meal with the people that matter most to them. Yet, we spend most of our lives chasing other dreams. I can tell he is coming to the realization that life is finite. For some people, this is what it takes to find the purpose and meaning they have been searching for their whole lives.

His life expectancy is only a few weeks to months, and he has already spent far too much of that admitted to a hospital with a problem we could have fixed in a few days if we would have known. My eyes tear up behind my mask as I think about how cancer strikes without mercy and always takes those who are most defenseless and innocent.

As I start the paperwork to get him admitted, he asks innocently, "Doctor, are you sick?" "I have seasonal allergies," I say, hiding my emotion in a stoic profession that teaches us to remain professionally distant.

The receptionist knocks at our clinic room door to remind me we are now two hours behind schedule. To add to the chaos, the 3 p.m. patient wants to leave because they have been waiting too long. I shrug my shoulders and return my attention to the only person in the world that matters to me right now, my patient.

I feel my hair stand on end as he mutters my most dreaded question, "How much longer do I have?"

I don't think this question will ever get easier. Sometimes I want to use a crystal ball to answer, but people have come to expect that medicine can do better than this. I could show him our complex statistical formulas that predict he only has a few weeks to months left. I could say that I have seen miracles before and give him hope that he may be one. What I really need is a magic wand to make it all go away. However, as one of my mentors always reminds me, in real life, there is no such thing as a magic wand.

So, instead, I settle into my usual spiel, putting my hand on his shoulder and reassuring him that we will do everything possible to make sure he lives the best quality of life possible until the end. I ask him if knowing how much longer he has will truly be helpful. Will it take away his hope? Will it instill fear? Anger? He pauses to think and replies, "I want to know how many more taco dinners I have left with my wife and son."