

METAPHORS IN CLINICAL MEDICINE

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Awake yet numb, oriented yet Lost, composed but shattered! My mind was not processing. There was a complete block to reception. Rushing stretchers, buzzing voices, queue chaos and I could hear yet not understand my surroundings

Excuse me? A soft voice brought me back to the happenings, to the existence in fact.

Two months down the post-graduate training I was on duty in Emergency Room (ER). She was an old lady with grey hair trembling body but bright eyes, who had come over for her diabetic control with the sugar level of 500mg/dl. I addressed and advised her necessary investigations including ABGs, I wrote along with some others.

She left with a smile and a satisfaction of being heard properly.

Yes! Exactly this kind satisfaction was needed, this confidence was wanted.

I belonged to the type of students who were always enthusiastic to learn and achieve. Step by step through the school, college and a whole journey of medical school which followed them had been flawless regarding this.

But maybe when our learning levels change, the approach needs an upgrade as well? Method by method and ways after ways, I was trying to master the interpretation of arterial blood gases for days now. We were taught these things on a lower scale already in our under- graduate levels, but now the responsibility and hence the knowledge required grew up.

A very basic investigation to advise while we come across patients in Medical ER presenting with unconsciousness, profuse vomiting, breathlessness and many other ways.

How will I be able to take gross decisions for patients with such complicated presentation of ABGs unless I am an expert in interpreting them?

A question that had me restless for the weeks now! Book to book and site to site and source to source, i searched but ended up even more confused than before about a valid, solid and straight forward concept.

Every effort was followed by increasing level of frustration and exhaustion.

I ended up at a point where I started believing that this might not be my cup of tea.

The dark sky, deadly silence, the security guard on his duty as always whistling every now and then, I should quit learning and hence give up if I can not learn a thing as basic as this. Do I even deserve enough to move on? Will I be competent enough to learn more complicated things? I had taken the decision one night while staring blankly at the roof of my room and lost in the depths.

The daily ward round ended and I had to go to the office. Knocked the door after having practised what I was about to say to the professor.

May I come in Sir? Yes sure! He replied in his own soft yet serious tone. With my boggled mind, trembling feet and sweaty palms, I popped in his office and I forgot what I had repeatedly been practising outside.

Blank stares and lost expressions, he observed and then asked what the matter is?

Being fully saturated and having my nerves burdened, I uttered every word I was suffering from in the last few weeks, how I was struggling to learn and how I had concluded to give up.

Sit down dear! He said and I just dropped my torso on the chair lying in front of his desk.

He smiled and then began with a strange question of what makes citrus fruits different from others? I said it is easy they are acidic (even more confused about the question itself).

Yes! Very right so what if I add more and more acid to the blood and the discussion began about how the PH, HCO₃ and pCO₂ are associated.

Then the roller coaster ride began with the bumps of anion gap, compensations, metabolic and respiratory alkalosis and acidosis.

He asked and I answered, he asked again and I just nodded. He spoke and explained. The wall clock was striking 12 noon. It's been an hour I am here sitting so comfortably and in the state I have always stated as

happy as lark because I was learning and yes I actually am learning, my heart whispered.

The session ended leaving me relaxed to the core.

A few mnemonics and some metaphors and there the magic happened. Those few pages which I struggling to learn now were on my finger tips.

Deep down I knew what went wrong with my effort. I had spent hours and days but was fruitless.

But somehow a random quote, "Sometimes it takes an overwhelming breakdown to have an undeniable breakthrough" contented me.

To conclude the experience I not only learnt Medicine but "A Way to Learn". Medicine is not an exact science it is traditionally known as an art. Medical images in the earlier 19th and 20th centuries were communicated through metaphors to make recognition easier in anticipation of the clinical counterpart when encountered in clinical practice they have served as teaching aids enhancing memory retention for the learners and have withstood test of times. Standard medical text books contain metaphors and they have become entrenched in teaching learning and examining.

Medical analogies no doubt will continue to be useful for education practice and aide memoirs for examinations and bring light humour for a long time to come.

I ultimately am grateful for the struggle. Now Awake, Oriented and composed with all the tangles resolved, worries faded and reception blocks removed.

"Blessed are those who refuse to fail

For they shall attain impossible heights

Blessed are those who strive to travel beyond edge of what is known for theirs is the uncharted realm."
(Michael Graves)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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