AJKD

Two Pilgrims

My first year in the nephrology fellowship had just ended. I was taking care of peritoneal dialysis outpatients. I also had Mrs. Tahta,* a lovely peritoneal dialysis (PD) nurse, with me. She had been working with PD patients since the program was established in our university 20 years ago. The day was uneventful: routine follow-ups, examination, prescriptions, and so forth—until Mr. Kahraman came.

Mr. Kahraman was the perfect PD patient. He never missed an appointment, nor did he miss any of his exchanges. Always euvolemic. Always adherent with his diet and prescriptions. Able to adjust his phosphate binders for what he ate. His burnt-out diabetes was easily managed with oral medication.

But that day, something was different. He had the look of a little boy about to ask for something forbidden. After the examination, he straightened up and whispered: "Doc, I want to go to hajj this year. What do you say?"

"Well, I think it is a terrible idea…but let me ask the boss, Dr. Zengin."

These were the kindest words that I could utter. Had I lost my professional attitude completely, I would have said: "Hell no! Extreme temperatures, tons of sand, transmittable illnesses, and a PD patient! What are you thinking?" I'm still grateful I was able to keep my internal outburst to myself. I was completely unprepared. No PD or hemodialysis or transplant patient had ever asked me about hajj. A pilgrimage to Mecca is a key pillar of the Muslim faith, a journey an observant Muslim must take at least once in a lifetime—but a journey that requires a days-long trip through a harsh environment. Healthy people fall ill on hajj. I couldn't even imagine what it meant in a medical sense for a patient who did manual peritoneal fluid exchanges.

Even my short reply turned out to be a communications disaster. In an instant, the hopeful look in his eyes was replaced by a sad, bitter stare. His tone was not resentful, but deeply disappointed.

"I have already talked to your boss, Doc. You know he had started me on PD."

I didn't expect this, and responded with silence.

"He told me the same thing, but more nicely," (ouch!) "but I thought if you were to side with me, I could convince him. Everything was in vain."

"I am sorry I could not be more positive, Mr. Kahraman, but I will contact you as soon as I talk with him. I promise to mention your willingness."

"One cannot defend what he does not believe, Doc. I already have my answer; do not bother."

Then he left the room, leaving me with my incompetence and Mrs. Tahta. He was the last patient that day, and we had some file work to do. Mrs. Tahta broke the silence: "Well, don't be so hard on yourself, Doc. It is a tough call… but to help you out, Mr. Nizam went to hajj 3 years ago and nothing happened to him."

Another shocker for the young fellow: Mr. Nizam was the mirror opposite of Mr. Kahraman. He was the definition of the non-adherent patient. If he had pulled it off, why couldn't Mr. Kahraman?

"Get some rest, Doc," said Mrs. Tahta. She sensed the shame I felt.

I could not get any rest. Was it my call? *No*. Why did I have to be so mean?

Incompetence makes you behave that way, I suppose. Did I reject his wish because it was based on a religious task? *No, I would do the same if he was going to the Atacama Desert for world peace or traveling to Antarctica to raise awareness about global warming or climbing the Himalayas just for fun*. I knew I was behaving like an over-protective parent, not like a physician. *But how to fix the damage done?* I spent a whole night thinking.

Next morning, I started reading about hajj. It turned out no PD patient going to hajj had ever been reported. I found limited data on hemodialysis but there was no quitting—I kept reading for three days. Meanwhile, I spoke to Mr. Nizam about his experience. He had not even bothered to ask a doctor! He just went there and completed the trip!

After a brief talk with the boss, I was ready to call Mr. Kahraman. "Mr. Kahraman, will you be able to see me at lunch break? And if possible, please bring your wife and children with you."

"Doc, you don't plan to deliver terrible news to me, do you?"

"I suppose I don't."

They came to the office on time as expected. I spent half an hour telling them the associated risks. I assured them I would be there to help upon their decision, and it was their call. In the end, there was joy filling the room.

"Doc, you know I am willing to take the risks. Please do tell me what I need to pay attention to."

His wife nodded. "Thanks so much, Doc, you cannot imagine how much this means to him."

So we talked about precautions; he agreed to wear a mask and not to fast. Vaccines were mandatory anyway. I made a phone call for his dialysate to be delivered along the route. Everything was arranged. I wished him luck.

One week after returning from hajj, he came for a follow-up.

"It was a bit tiring, but I managed, Doc."

"I had no doubt you would."

I completed my fellowship, and started as a nephrologist at a community hospital. Last week, two

*Names have been changed to protect patient privacy.

years since the last time I saw him, Mr. Kahraman's name was on my list.

"Here for a second time, Mr. Kahraman?" I smiled.

"No doc, one hajj is more than enough," he laughed. "But your next patient is a PD patient and a friend of mine. He wants to go to hajj, and I told him I know the doctor you are seeking. I am here just to give you a heads up."

This time, there was gratitude in his eyes.

There we were, two pilgrims. Mr. Kahraman had completed his journey, while mine was just beginning.

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doi: 10.1053/j.ajkd.2019.07.003

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