Afraid To Speak Up To Medical Power

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The slender, weather-beaten, elderly Polish immigrant had been diagnosed with lung cancer nearly a year earlier and was receiving chemotherapy as part of a clinical trial. I was a surgical consultant, called in to help control the fluid that kept accumulating in his lungs.

During one visit, he motioned for me to come closer. His voice was hoarse from a tumor that spread, and the constant hissing from his humidified oxygen mask meant I had to press my face nearly against his to understand his words.

“This is getting harder, doctor,” he rasped. “I’m not sure I’m up to anymore chemo.”

I was not the only doctor that he confided to. But what I quickly learned was that none of us was eager to broach the topic of stopping treatment with his primary cancer doctor.

That doctor was a rising superstar in the world of oncology, a brilliant physician-researcher who had helped discover treatments for other cancers and who had been recruited to lead our hospital’s then lackluster cancer center. Within a few months of the doctor’s arrival, the once sleepy department began offering a dazzling array of experimental drugs. Calls came in from outside doctors eager to send their patients in for treatment, and every patient who was seen was promptly enrolled in one of more than a dozen well-documented treatment protocols.

But now, no doctors felt comfortable suggesting anything but the most cutting-edge, aggressive treatments.

Even the No. 2 doctor in the cancer center, Robin to the chief’s cancer-battling Batman, was momentarily taken aback when I suggested we reconsider the patient’s chemotherapy plan. “I don’t want to tell him,” he said, eyes widening. He reeled off his chief’s vast accomplishments. “I mean, who am I to tell *him* what to do?”

We stood for a moment in silence before he pointed his index finger at me. “*You* tell him,” he said with a smile. “You tell him to consider stopping treatment.”

Memories of this conversation came flooding back last week when I read an essay on the problems posed by hierarchies within the medical profession.

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