Beneath The Surface

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Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?
-Henry David Thoreau

It is almost 7:00 a.m. and I carry my briefcase and lunch bag from the car to my office. I nod to some of the night shift employees heading home. Another day has begun.

I type my password and check the computer, reminding myself of the twenty patients I am scheduled to see today in the cancer clinic. A few new consults with untreated or recurrent cancers occupy the longer appointment slots. Follow-up and post-operative patients will be seen more quickly. It will be a full day but, hopefully, I will grab a few minutes around noon to eat my sandwich.

I print out some office notes and carry them with me to our weekly 7:15 a.m. Tumor Conference. Several physicians present cases for discussion. We review the scans and the pathology, making recommendations for treatment. We determine who is eligible for a clinical trial. We look at recent research results. Usually, a brief discussion will mean better news for the patient; we have something to offer. A longer discussion can reflect the lack of good options.

Clinic gets going. First is a 64-year-old man with a tongue cancer. Symptoms have been present for about six months. The scans are helpful. The cancer has not caused much damage. Only one lymph node is involved. Everything else looks fine. I run through the surgical risks, benefits, and alternatives. I prepare the consent form and look at the schedule. Any questions?

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