

Life on the Oncology Floor: An Ode to the Cancer Patient

By Elizabeth Baldwin

On morning rounds, we would stand in dimly lit hospital rooms, watching elderly couples hold hands in silence, their faded, scratched wedding rings that were missing a few stones here and there overlapping in perfect, worn harmony. Fifty years of marriage, and now they were facing the impossible: one of them would likely be gone soon. They had all spent double my lifetime together, unable to remember what it was like to be without each other. There were often entire unspoken conversations between them through only glances. There were no grand declarations of love, no dramatic sobs—just the quiet weight of a life shared, now measured in months instead of years. This was life on the oncology floor.

Then, there were the patients who were my own mother's age—women in their prime, vibrant, full of life, who had just started to feel “off” one day. Their children were in the room, kids that reminded me of my brother and me, their expressions often a mix of confusion, grief, and forced strength. These were families that just went on vacation last month. Families barely a few years past soccer carpool and graduation parties and freshman move in day. Families that looked so parallel to my own that I could hardly bear it. Parents overwhelmed with the grief and guilt of inevitably leaving their children in a world alone, children who could not begin to picture the rest of their life without their parent. This was life on the oncology floor.

Some patients sat alone in their room as they received their diagnosis. “Is there anyone you want us to call?” we would ask. A quiet, simple, “No” was all that was received in response. No spouse, no children, no nearby family to share in the grief or to fight alongside them. Some patients were estranged from their parents or children and chose to continue on in solitude, some were the only living member of their family left, some had never really had anyone to begin with. This was life on the oncology floor.

And then, there was the starkest of contrasts—the patients who fought relentlessly versus those who embraced their fate. Some patients resiliently clung to every available option, determined to stretch time, no matter the cost. They endured chemo infusion after chemo infusion, hospital stay after hospital stay, because hope, even the faintest flicker, was worth everything for them and their families. They fought with a fierce determination that I found so admirable, because sometimes they came out victorious, and sometimes they did not. On the other side of that coin, I found the patients who, having lived long, full lives, met their diagnosis with an almost serene acceptance. “I’ve had a good run,” said with steady voices. Voices without even the slightest intonation of fear. These were the patients who forgo treatment entirely, just to have a few comfortable months at home. This was life on the oncology floor.

Oncology alters your perspective in ways no textbook or medical school lecture ever could. It forces you to look at life differently—to see what matters when everything is ripped away in the time it takes for someone to read a pathology report. It is an emotional field of medicine, one that breaks you and rebuilds you all at once. My intention of telling this story and sharing my experience is not to warn of the woes and sadness of caring for people with cancer. My intention is to help other students see the beauty and the strength that radiates off these patients and their families, shining through the cracks on even the darkest of days. Every medical student should have the chance to stand in these rooms, to witness these moments of humanity, because it is in

these spaces of quiet courage and profound love that medicine becomes something far greater than science. It becomes life itself.