

# Hard to say goodbye

An Essay by Stuart L. Segelnick, D.D.S., M.S.

Ten years ago a wonderful patient entered my practice. What I remember of that encounter is very little. She was 73 years old back then, and her hair was graying. She spoke in very gentle tones and she initially struck me as educated and kind. Although she reminded me in every way of my grandma, in reality she was probably the grandmother anyone would ever hope to have.

She was referred to me initially by her general dentist for periodontal surgery. After her treatments her dentist felt, due to her severe periodontal disease, that it would be in her best interest to continue her three month periodontal maintenance therapy at my office. Her dentist would see her at least once a year for a full dental evaluation and any necessary management.

For the past 10 years

this wonderful patient would return every three months, and now going through her chart I'm genuinely surprised to see that she did not miss one appointment! I wonder how many of my colleagues can find that quality of patient, a true Lou Gehrig of dental patients. I remember many of our conversations through the years of how proud she was of her daughter and daughter-in-law, who were both registered nurses, and her grandchildren attending college. Though she didn't come out and say it, I felt from her stories how difficult it was for an African-American to come by such education in the 1930s through the 1950s when she was of college age.

Yesterday, when she came in for her three month visit, I walked into the operatory and went directly to the sink to wash my hands. My

back was facing her when I asked her "how have you been". "Oh, not very good," she replied. As I dried my hands I turned to her and was surprised to see my longtime patient looking so frail and a bit bloated. "What's going on?" I slowly prompted. "I'm sorry I canceled my last appointment and had to cancel three *"...I wanted to give 'my patient' a hug; I wanted to tell her she was the best patient I've ever had."*

others" As she said this I was looking through the chart and noticed the last time she came in was five months ago. "But I was very sick, they found that I have breast cancer and it has metastasized into my lungs...stage four." She said as I noticed her now breathing labouredly. At that moment I felt like the proverbial deer,



frozen by the headlights of a car racing unforgivingly forward. I may have said "I can't believe it" or "I'm so sorry." I'm not sure. But by the time I realized who I was again, I was sitting next to her telling the story of my mother, whom I lost to ovarian cancer when she was only 56 years old. It was not a telling that she hadn't heard before, because I noticed her nodding that she remembered. We talked about her family and all their accomplishments, but I saw that was a mistake as she got all misty-eyed. My mouth then just said on its own "G-d should grant you a full recovery." She looked up into the sky and said without missing a beat, "It's all in G-d's hands." What happened afterward were phone calls to her physician and oncol-

ogist trying to determine if any antibiotic coverage was needed. The hygienist had already performed some of the scaling and I had asked "my patient" why she didn't tell the hygienist any of this important change in her medical history. "I wanted to tell you first", was her reply. At that point I had to turn away as a tear fell down my face.

I have had 10 years of feeling a persons trust, listening to the good, the bad, the interesting, the boring, the bland, the exciting. I love my profession and enjoy the interaction. Although times like these are horrible, because life always ends, I cherish the times we have had and the hope that is always present.

After 10 years of seeing and speaking, treating and caring for someone at least four times a year, I realized that I have more of a relationship with "my patient" then I have with many of my friends and family. I know I will pray every day for her recovery, but unfortunately I am jaded, I have had too much familiarity with people's illnesses and have seen too many people pass on from this late-stage cancer.

Looking back to yesterday, I wanted to give "my patient" a hug; I wanted to tell her she was the best patient I've ever had. I wanted to let her know that I will always care about her. "Would this be proper?" I thought. I found myself up by the front desk, stunned and wordless, when the secretary asked to schedule her next 3 month appointment. "My patient" said: "G-d willing" as she set up the appointment.



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## New York State Ends Flu Shot Mandate

*Continued from Page 1*  
the end of October. This week, the CDC changed expected delivery to just 27.7 million doses. The CDC allowed the state to order only 146,300 doses of vaccine, even though New York's health providers requested more than 1,482,822 doses.

The order from Health Commissioner Richard Daines that hospital health care workers who come in contact with patients, including dentists, hygienists, and assistants, receive the

vaccine came earlier this fall and has resulted in at least two lawsuits and protests over what many workers claimed was an unfair intrusion on their freedom of choice.

Daines presented the measure as a simple matter of due diligence for health care workers, whose presence in hospitals and other facilities brought them into close contact with infants, the elderly and other people whose immune systems might be compromised.

Daines said Thursday that it was essential to first get the vaccine to those who need it most. "We had told hospitals that if they had to choose between vaccinating patients or employees to vaccinate patients first," Daines said in a prepared statement. "This week, the CDC confirmed that most of the national supply of seasonal flu vaccine has been distributed, and that H1N1 vaccine distribution is far be-

hind projections. New evidence is showing that H1N1 can be especially virulent to pregnant women and young people – so they should get vaccinated first."

They will be missed...

Dr. Michael Bernfeld  
September 2009

Dr. Abraham Lieberman  
October 4, 2005

Dr. Edward Zimmerman  
January 30, 2009