

## Vignette

### What Our Patients Teach Us

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In the musical, *The King and I*, Deborah Kerr sings, “If you become a teacher, by your students you’ll be taught.” The same can be said of physicians, for our patients have much to teach us. Our patients can teach us courage, resilience, compassion, and if we take time to listen, even wisdom.

Several years ago, I worked in medical cannabis clinics scattered throughout California. These were not dispensaries, and I could neither prescribe nor dispense marijuana. My job was to examine patients and determine whether they met the qualifications for treatment with medical cannabis under the state law. I saw patients from all walks of life: tattoo artists, law enforcement officers, students, mental health professionals, construction workers, housewives and lawyers. Most of my patients suffered from chronic pain syndromes, but there were some who had other conditions such as Parkinson’s Disease and PTSD.

One morning, an Afro-American man in a wheelchair came to the clinic to renew his cannabis card. He was in his early fifties, soft-spoken and neatly dressed. After I entered his personal data into the computer I asked him why he used cannabis and whether it had helped him.

“I have muscle and bladder spasms,” he replied. “This is the only thing that helps.”

I jotted this in the medical record and then inquired, “How did you become paralyzed?”

“I was in a fight,” he said. “The guy got a gun and came back and shot me.”

Although he had replied in a matter-of-fact way with little emotion, the horror of the situation struck me, and I burst out, “Oh, my God! That is so tragic!”

He looked at me very calmly and replied, “No, not necessarily. I was on a bad path, and if I had continued on that path, I would be dead now.” He paused for a moment and then continued. “But now I have beautiful children; I have beautiful grandchildren.” He paused again, motioned to the wheelchair and said emphatically, “This is nothing!”

His reply stunned me, and I reflected on it long after he left the clinic. I had just met a man who had been permanently disabled and had discovered within his circumstances a hidden blessing. He had chosen to savor every breath and had refused to allow the man who took his legs to determine how he would navigate the rest of his life. He had faced hate and aggression and found love. He had demonstrated to his children and others that there are forces in the world more powerful than violence. Would that we all had such wisdom.

### Author Note

This vignette is a creative reflection on an actual physician-patient meeting and dialogue. The author is solely responsible for the contents of this vignette. The contents do not necessarily reflect the position of the organizations and communities that he serves. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

