View From the Bridge

A major aspect of medical education during the clinical years is learning how not to behave.

Late one busy Saturday night during my rotation in the emergency room of a general hospital in San Francisco, while I was an intern, a young woman was brought in who had severed a radial artery in a suicide attempt. A tourniquet was applied, an intravenous line was started, and she was given fluids and, as soon as possible, blood transfusions. Once she was stabilized, the surgery resident and I began to repair the severed artery. The despondency and hopelessness expressed in the young woman’s eyes seemed to reach out to me. She periodically moaned and cried; she talked about how life was not worth living. I gathered that she had just been rejected by a loved one and this had led to the attempt to end her life. The resident simply said, “Next time, why don’t you jump off the Golden Gate Bridge?” I was so shocked and stunned, as was the patient, that I didn’t know what to say.

Following the repair of the artery, which was done with technical skill, the resident left. I tried to comfort the patient and to explain that he had been tired and upset and really didn’t mean what he had said. Later, however, when I talked with the resident, he said he did mean what he had said. He wasn’t sorry and he wondered why he should waste his talents on people who only wanted to end their lives. Her condition of feeling hopeless, being down and out, and seeing death as the only way out of her troubled situation seemed to be a personal affront to him. After getting nowhere with him, I spoke with the head of the emergency department about the incident, and he too seemed unconcerned.

This young physician violated the oath of Hippocrates: Do no harm. But why? Was the patient’s despair too close to home for him to handle? Was he too self-centered and unaware to care? Was he exhausted and emotionally drained? I don’t know why. But I still wonder what got in the way of his feeling the patient’s pain and walking in her shoes.

David H. Rosen, MD
Rochester, NY

A Piece of My Mind