WHEN SOMETHING IS WRONG

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It's flu season again. I have that thing that's been going around, the one that starts with a scratch in your throat and moves to down your chest. I've been coughing up painful phlegm since last weekend and my voice is comical and craggy. I haven't left my bed all day. There's a hot water bottle underneath my aching calf muscles.

I'm alone and the house is quiet. I've lived away from home for over 20 years and have lived in another province for over a decade, but my instinct now, when I'm feeling sick, feeling like something is wrong, is to call my mother.

Mum died in April. I missed her last phone call while I was at the gym on the treadmill. I waited too long to return the call and I didn't get to speak to her before she passed away. It took me weeks to start to forgive myself for not picking up her call. I've gone to call her countless times since her death, to tell her a story about work (I'm a PA on an acute care and trauma surgery service) or to share a story she would have laughed at, and I have to remind myself that this is just a habit, one that will weaken over time.

Mum's death, after years of ill health and a recent orthopedic injury, was still sudden and destabilizing for our family. She took a fall and the resulting tibial plateau fracture left her with chronic leg pain that haunted her walking hours during the last two years of her life. It took me months to feel fully present at work again. When one of my patients passed away unexpectedly or presented with similar traumatic injuries. I'd feel numb. Exhausted. Ineffective.

Shivering now in bed, I want to call home and check in, the way I've called home while walking down a dark street alone in university or when I have had a particularly bad aura before a migraine. It was a way to be connected. For a minute now I feel a bit pathetic, childish. But even as an adult, I need to know someone is there. Someone cares that I don't

feel well.

It occurs to me, my sweaty forehead rolling onto a cool spot on the pillow, that as a PA I have that duty to care. My presence and my concern for my patients is a major part of my job. As bad as I feel today, I am not as sick as most of my patients. I am privileged: I enjoy generally good health and I am able to move and speak and breathe freely. I have never been shot or stabbed. I have never had blood drained from my chest through a tube. I have never had my colon removed or endured a round of chemotherapy. But I want someone to be there when I feel ill or anxious. Someone to care.

In an improbable stroke of bad luck, Dad became ill a few months after Mum died. This time I got to visit him a week before he died, shortly after being diagnosed with lung cancer. He didn't look like the stern, robust man I remembered. His face was pale and thin. Sixty pounds had melted from his six foot two inch frame. He relied on home oxygen. The buzz and hiss of the O2 concentrator punctuated each breath while he slept on the recliner in my sister's living room, too weak to move downstairs to his bedroom. Watching him decline, I knew couldn't save him, but I could let him know that I was there with him, at least for a short while. He died in his sleep three weeks after his diagnosis, before a decision could be made about any treatment options.

The medical world is a tough place. As care providers, we are exposed to suffering. We see the outcomes of violence and poverty. The system is massive and circuitous and in many areas, under-resourced. We are often tired, overworked and undernourished. Patients and their families expect results and reassurances that we cannot guarantee. We are prone to stress, to friction with our coworkers. Sometimes we make mistakes.

But it's a beautiful world too. On the best days, our skills help us to relieve pain and anxiety and -- as the cliché goes -- to make a difference for patients. We are often the only people there when our patients feel overwhelmed, exhausted and vulnerable. We are their advocates, their witnesses. We are that voice on the end of the line when something is wrong.