

MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives*

Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor

Reflections from Armenia

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It's 3 am local time, and the jet lag has allowed me to reflect quietly, alone, on my thoughts from the past few weeks as well as those thoughts which have been stirring for much longer. Through years of studying and training, I had wanted to be part of such a cause, but always felt it would be such a different experience contributing once my training had been completed, more as a teacher, rather than a student.

I had the opportunity to work with the Plastics Foundation, on a medical mission to Yerevan, Armenia, performing reconstructive surgery on children. What was most memorable, most inspiring and will stay with me the longest are those relationships I forged with our fellow Armenian doctors, students and most of all patients, within the past ten days. Not only as a pediatric anesthesiologist; not only as a native Armenian, but most of all as a human being, where all too often we are carried away with our daily grind.

The patients proved to be my greatest teachers and inspiration, as they allow us to realize, sometimes much later than our brief encounters with them, what the purpose is for all of our efforts. Too often, our successes are measured by efficiency...speed, turnover; and we fail to realize the impact of even a simple procedure on the lives of our patients and their families. The relationships with our fellow healthcare professionals are meant not only to teach them, but also to teach us while creating a foundation for collaboration and learning. In such a technologically advanced age, our methods of communication, teaching, interaction and interpersonal relationships seem endless, yet, we realize how much we truly take for granted. Many of our first world problems constitute interest rates, traffic jams and

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status updates, whereas, many of their third world problems constitute needs such as social services, safe roads, basic healthcare and even electricity and running water, particularly in the villages, not far from where others savor the expensive restaurants and shops of the capital city of Yerevan. A few of the nurses I worked with endured 24 hour shifts and continued to stay and help the following day, well past their departure time, in order to contribute. All with smiles on their faces! Needless to say, many of them commute home on buses for hours. We often take for granted the resources and information that is so easily at our disposal, simply a few swipes away on our smart phones. Yet, working with my fellow anesthesiologists from Armenia, I was impressed by their skills and knowledge and overjoyed by their willingness and ideas on continued collaboration.

For me, a first international medical mission, the days in the hospital were full of constant adjustments and considerations. From the equipment used, to the relationship between the nurses and physicians, and their “normal” routine. Thankfully, I speak the language, but we were given a brief introduction to “informed consent” on our first day in the hospital by one of the anesthesia residents, an astute and well spoken young man. Parents simply want to be assured that their children will be well taken care of, and they put their faith and trust in you, which is both a humbling and inspiring sentiment.

So if you ask me what will I remember most? What has inspired me most? At home I stare at the thousands of lights of the cars ahead of me in traffic on the way to work. In Armenia, our jaws dropped every morning with the views of Mount Ararat on the bus ride to the hospital. The attitudes of the doctors, students and nurses...frustration in their eyes and in their tone, mixed with hope. The conversations with a great new friend about stars and Pluto, while running into the Opera House on my last evening in town. The ideas exchanged by fellow anesthesiologists and surgeons in the hopes for future endeavors, education, collaboration. The children and their parents that had only their words and hugs to express their gratitude. Ayo...Yes...all of that and more.