

Health Education
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Unexpectedly, I spent Winter Quarter being treated for breast cancer. One might say it was an instance of rather intensive experiential learning. For while our university sometimes speaks of “the Gilman Divide” as if the eponymous road that separates our medical and general campuses were a tesseract between universes, I discovered, first-hand, how tightly our goals and approaches intersect.

When the technician recalled me from the lounge, where post-mammogram patients await release back to their daily lives, I expected only to be told that an image was imperfect and needed retaking. Instead I was introduced to a radiologist who said there were ominous indications in the initial scan, requiring immediate multi-faceted follow-up. Invasive cancer was a distinct possibility. In short order, came further mammograms, an ultrasound, biopsies, and a conversation with a surgeon about what additional data was needed for a definitive diagnosis. The following months included MRI, genetic testing, further surgical consults, an operation to excise the (fortunately, non-invasive) carcinoma, and rehabilitative therapy.

What impressed me in the moment when the radiologist first broached the bad news was the clear impression that a well-rehearsed team was springing into action to address a serious, but familiar challenge. It was a bit alarming, since it reinforced the potentially dire nature of my prognosis. Yet, the overwhelming sense was reassurance that the required components would come together without my having to know what was needed. Every patient at UC San Diego Health should have that same experience of well-coordinated care. Moreover, when we speak of being a student-centered university, that should include affording our students an analogous sense of wrap-around care -- the knowledge that if they reach out to someone in Student Affairs, the Teaching + Learning Commons, their academic department, the Graduate Division, or their College, guidance and assistance will be forthcoming.

During the biopsy, one of the nurses stood beside me, gently stroking my hand and wrist. It was terribly comforting to have that bit of human contact at a moment when the rest of the medical team was carrying out an invasive procedure with antiseptic precision and focus. The way the team overtly stepped through its “Time Out” protocol before the first injection (confirming aloud with me and with one another that the patient, procedure, and location were all correct) was also reassuring in its structure and clarity. This mix of structure and compassion is what we should strive for when we need to work through difficult situations with our students: a missed exam, an academic integrity violation, a roommate dispute. Both elements serve to build the trust and connection that can enable the student to cope with, surmount, and ultimately learn from the incident.

Throughout the string of tests and consultations, the medical professionals provided detailed information, reading suggestions, and answers to my questions. They discussed their related clinical research and the national data aggregation efforts they contribute to. They nudged me to learn about my health condition and be an active partner in my treatment and recovery – just as we encourage our students to take charge of their own education. I had never appreciated quite so deeply how our physicians act as teachers, not only of medical trainees, but of their patients. Similarly, during the follow-up occupational therapy, I’ve been pushed to be actively engaged in regaining full strength; my therapists’ describing exercises will not heal me, only my learning to perform them accurately and practicing them reliably will do so. Again, this is analogous to our assigning homework and capstone projects to our students; only their own mental efforts will truly enable them to strengthen their understanding and skills.

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues in UC San Diego Health and UC San Diego Health Sciences, not only for the care they provided me and for their efforts to improve treatment options in their specialties – but also for the distinctive ways in which they participate in our university’s overarching educational mission.