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A house call I'll never forget

EVERYONE HAS MOMENTS IN THEIR CAREER THAT THEY LOOK BACK ON and inwardly cringe. Moments of embarrassment, and awkwardness. Occasions when you got the wrong end of the stick about something and responded in a totally inappropriate way, moments that bring tears to your eyes, and events that make you want to hide.

If only we lived our lives on video and could go back and edit out the bad parts. But it wouldn't be half as interesting or instructive.

I will never forget that day in George's house. He was 52 and had developed a particularly aggressive cancer three years earlier. He had shown tremendous bravery and had withstood and appreciated everything that high-tech hospital medicine could throw at him.

Now it looked like we were near the end of the road. On his last visit to the hospital he had been told that his secondaries were widespread, and that the armoury of potential treatments had been exhausted. There was nothing else that could be done from a curative point of view.

To deal with his vomiting, and inability to take oral medication, we had fixed him up with a morphine pump which kept him comfortable and relatively free from pain.

Indeed in George's case, the pump had been so successful that he was enormously reluctant to have it removed, even though he was now able to tolerate oral medication, and was even managing to take a little food and drink by mouth. So every day one of the health centre team would call in and change the syringe, make sure there was nothing else that he needed, and check that he was comfortable.

Typically, the call would only take a few minutes, but it always left us feeling truly humbled and inspired by his remarkable fighting spirit, and also by the extraordinary support and courage of his wife. Their love for each other was total and immensely moving to observe.

'As I sat by the bed, I sensed that something was different.... I just could not place what was bothering me'

I can still picture his bed in the light and airy downstairs room, with huge French windows that overlooked their beautiful garden. When the weather was fine his wife would open them and let the sunshine stream in. His ageing and devoted yellow Labrador would lie at the foot of the bed, and music – typically Vivaldi – would play softly from his stereo system.

I remember thinking that there could be many worse ways of dying. Both George and his wife had come to terms with the inevitable. They saw each day together as a bonus, a day of pleasure that could be spent together. It was a genuine privilege to know them.

Then one day I arrived at the house to top up the morphine pump, and as I sat by the bed, I sensed that something was different. I looked around but I just could not place what was bothering me.

'Something's changed,' I said. 'Somehow the room seems different.'

George's wife looked at me with tears in her eyes. 'It's the dog,' she said. I looked around. Their lovely dog had become so much part of the furniture that I'd only noticed him when he was gone.

'We found he had cancer,' she explained. 'The vet said there was nothing that could be done. So we had to have him put to sleep.'

George's eyes met mine and I simply didn't know what to say.

He lived for another two months.

Tell us what you think?

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