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WHAT YOUR PATIENT IS THINKING

Help! My trusted doctor is retiring

Wim Rietdijk shares what it is like when your trusted healthcare professional retires, and how to process the change

Wim JR Rietdijk

In 2011, I received a diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma. It was a period that has affected me ever since. I received nine months of chemotherapy—and in retrospect this seems a little bump along the way—but I was admitted to hospital several times with severe side effects. I also had months of “scanxiety”—the fear patients have about the outcome of the next scan—regarding my PET/CT scans, but finally I received good news: complete remission. I could start living again.

The care I received from my haematologist was great. She treated me from the point of diagnosis, and we built a trusting relationship. We got to know each other, and found a constructive way to communicate about the disease and treatments. I was able to share with her my emotions, my thoughts, and my insecurities. She was open to hearing my worries, listened, and reassured me when she could.

My beacon, moving on

In December 2019 I received news that the Hodgkin's lymphoma had returned. I was back in survival mode as a patient receiving intensive chemotherapy and an autologous stem cell transplantation. This time I was less naive and more aware of the consequences. My haematologist was there, and she continued to help me understand and cope with my situation. She walked the fine line between maintaining professional distance and showing empathy, and I thought of her as my beacon.

About a year before my final consultation, during a regular check-up, my haematologist announced that she would soon be retiring. My first (very irrational) thought was: can doctors actually retire? It meant the end of a 10 year trusting relationship. I left the consultation room feeling that I had lost the only landmark I had in navigating my health and treatment.

Processing the change

After the initial shock, I started processing the thought that I had to let go of what we had built up. As the final check-up approached, I started feeling insecure and uncertain. At the end of that consultation, my haematologist wished me well. I promised myself I wouldn't cry, but when I realised that this would be our last encounter, I did cry. We said goodbye. Slowly my emotions turned to pride: pride that I had been treated by one of the most experienced doctors in the field. I hope she knows the impact she had. For other retiring physicians, I hope you can talk about it with your patients to help them prepare for the change.

What you need to know

- Long term relationships built on trust between health professionals and patients mean a lot to patients
- The ending of these relationships can affect the emotional wellbeing of patients, sometimes creating worry and fear
- Telling patients about your upcoming retirement can help them prepare for the change

Education into practice

- When might you tell your patients that you are retiring?
- How could you ensure patients feel support during the transition from your care to that of another person?
- In what other situations might you apply some of the learning points from this experience?

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