

The Touch

The medical interviewing class I help teach recently held a group discussion. It was on the subject of touching. I don't teach the class alone – I share a small group of first year medical and dental students with two other faculty members from different specialties. It's an intimate group with insightful students, and our conversations often meander to unexpected places. Even so, I was surprised when both my colleagues took a reserved and cautionary tone when we talked about how we touch our patients.

"Think twice before you touch a patient." One exhorted, "You never know if they might respond badly, so it's a risk you might not want to take." The other nodded in agreement.

"It can land you in deep trouble." She said.

I don't want to put my students at risk, and it is important to read an intimate situation before acting. Both my co-teachers are older, more experienced. They have been in practice much longer than me, fresh out of residency. I felt worried and confused. Were they right? Was I doing something wrong? Because I work as a dentist in a jail, and I touch my patients all the time.

When I first started my job, I confess I expected to find it a little glamorous, or at least a little exciting. But for all the video cameras and alarm bells and concrete walls 3 feet thick, the dental clinic is actually a completely normal-looking room. The dental chair is even a cheery shade of blue. Unfortunately, it's a chair it takes far too long to get into for those in need. There are about 600 men in the jail where I work, and last time I checked, the list of people in urgent need of a dentist was nearing 200.

All of my patients are in pain, and usually, they are terrified. They have waited patiently for months because they have no choice. Sometimes this is the first time in their lives that they have visited a dentist. I spend most of the day pulling teeth and cleaning infection out of gums. Sometimes I can devote some time to explaining how a patient can find a dentist to treat him when he is released. Many of my patients are eligible for free dental care because the state, the same one that has put them in the jail, still considers them, for health insurance, to be children.

My fourth patient of the day, like the others before him, needs to have a tooth extracted. The antibiotics given to him by a nurse have brought the swelling down, but his eyes are red from lack of sleep, and his hand tightly cups his chin. It is obvious that he is suffering. He is quiet when I ask to examine his mouth, and even more quiet when explain what I will do. When I ask if this is alright, he simply nods.

As I attend to his infected teeth, I hear a wordless lilt that I know is a question. "I'm sorry, what?" I remove my tools from his mouth to hear him better.

"Do you feel safe here with me?"

Everyone entering the building goes through a metal detector. The elevators don't work without a special badge. There is always a correctional officer standing at the open door leading into the dental clinic. I am far safer here than I will be on my bicycle, coming home at the end of the day. But that is not what he means.

Lots of people are afraid of dentists. I'm used to that; actually, I'm pretty good at working with patients who have dental anxiety. But when I walk down the street, no one is afraid of *me*. I exist in a body that guarantees I will always have that luxury. I can only imagine how painful that must be, like the

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constant dull ache of a bad tooth. And yet the man before me wants to make sure I'm comfortable. My patient, a person it is my job to care for, is caring for me.

"Do you feel safe here, with me?"

I think of the concerns my colleagues voiced, and I think of the times my patient has been touched. There is the jostling of the correctional officers who escorted him to the clinic. There is my own rough, clinical manipulations in his mouth. Perhaps, if he is lucky, he has felt a furtive pat on the arm from a visiting family member. My hand goes immediately to his shoulder and gives a warm squeeze. I leave it there for a while before I resume my work.

My day at the jail is also visiting day. At 7 pm, I grab my backpack and bicycle helmet and slip past the lines of people here to see their incarcerated loved ones. Some are gray-haired; some look like they have come here straight from their high school classroom. Some hold newborns. I do not know how long they have been waiting. Before being granted entrance, they are heavily scrutinized, yield their driver's licenses, and deposit all their belongings in lockers. They wait in small groups to pass through the jail's hulking doors, holding laminated visitors' passes up to the officer, who frowns at them behind a thick pane of bullet-proof glass. I don't have to do any of that. For me, the doors just open.

Biking through the crisp fall air, I reflect on the day, on what went well, on what I can do better. My mind snags on my patient's words and they echo back to me. "Do you feel safe here?" There are so many things I wanted to say in response. *I'm sorry you're in pain. I am sad things are so unfair. I am so touched you are concerned about me. I want you to have the dignity and respect you deserve.*

A touch, I know, can't say all that. But what I hope it manages to say is simply *I'm here.*