Physician of the Month April 2012

Stephen O'Connell, MD

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I have had the privilege and pleasure of working side-by-side with Dr. O'Connell for approximately eight years. In that time I have had ample opportunity and cause to write this letter, but have never done so because of my close relationship with Dr. O'Connell and my fear that it may be misconstrued as something other than genuine. Today, however, I find that this is a rather petty excuse, and I am compelled to share the events of the last week regarding a patient that presented to our clinic.

A young man, who is currently facing economic hardship and an unstable living situation presented to our clinic with a fracture of his arm. The fracture was quite severe and complicated by the fact that the patient was already several weeks out from the initial injury. Dr. O'Connell explained the severity of the injury and recommended surgery to the patient. The patient agreed and the surgery was scheduled for Dr. O'Connell's next day in the operating room. Due to the patients living situation, there was difficulty getting the patient scheduled and it looked as though his surgery might be postponed. When Dr. O'Connell found out, he personally called the patient and arranged all the logistics so that surgery could be performed. The surgery went well, but due to the complex nature, Dr. O'Connell recommended that patient return to the clinic the very next day for evaluation. The next day Dr. O'Connell received a call telling him that the patient would be unable to make the appointment. The patient informed Dr. O'Connell that he did not have transportation to the clinic. Dr. O'Connell emphasized the critical importance of the visit and then offered to pay for a cab to bring him to and from the appointment, a round trip tab of $140.00. The patient arrived and left by cab, was cared for, and is currently

undergoing the rehabilitative process.

While this event served as a catalyst for this letter and nomination, it is hardly an isolated event. For the one story I relate to you, I have a hundred others of equal or greater significance. We practice medicine in a world where cost analysis and capitation often overshadow diagnosis and treatment. This is not by choice, but rather survival. Regardless, the current environment often forgets the human element of what we do. It is remembering and honoring the human aspect of what we do that sets Dr. O'Connell apart. He is not a provider rendering a service, but rather a doctor caring for his patients. He understands, at a very fundamental level, that no matter what our roles are in this world, we are all just human beings. He believes the differences that cast distance between us can be easily traversed simply by talking with one another.

When I started working for Dr. O'Connell, I asked him what he wanted me to be. I expected to hear compassionate and/or empathetic, instead he said "I want you to be right, I want you to do what is right." I've come to realize that for Dr. O'Connell it is not about the destination as much as the journey, being right is not as important as the effort to do what is right. Simply put, if we constantly strive for what is right, compassion and empathy naturally emerge, making for the highest quality care, in an environment this is wholly sincere.

You see, Dr. O'Connell didn't just pay $140 for a cab, he did what was right, just as he does everyday with every patient. For Dr. O'Connell this IS the morale imperative. As a husband, father, friend, and physician assistant, this is who I want to care for those I care about and this is the person I want to mentor me professionally.

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