

Editorial – Letter of Patient’s Gratitude

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Received: 06 Apr 2024

Accepted: 15 May 2024

Published: 22 May 2024

J Short Name: ACMCR

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Citation:

Vinceova A, Editorial – Letter of Patient’s Gratitude. Ann Clin Med Case Rep. 2024; V13(16): 1-2

1. Letter to Editor

This is the letter from the patient and his family I found while moving the house and going through all the stuff. Not only my paper, but also papers of my beloved partner. Christian Bartko is surgeon with capital S. He is absolutely devoted to, I can say, everything what he is doing. Maybe that is also the reason for my jealousy, cause all his patients love him so much. Sometimes I must compete for the attention. Knowing him for 12 years and being blessed also working with him on many cases, I know that he doesn’t call for attention, but I think this is case of humbleness that many doctors, who do their jobs for so called “job satisfaction” as my editorial manager called it, know the feeling of heart-warming satisfaction, when the patient and the family show gratitude by “just” sending the letter. This one is calling for publishing, cause it shows the perspective from the other side of the operation table. Telling the truth, when I was reading it, tears ran down my face. Let me start:

2. Risk worth taking

“May 14th, I stayed in shock. I had dysphagic problems for quite a while, but all my troubles were solved with balloon catheterization of oesophagus until that point. Also that day I went to gastroenterologist. I knew that I have to expect the examination with “tube” inserted in my stomach. But this time the results were catastrophic. They found tumor of oesophageus and the doctor said straight to my face, that the findings are bad, really bad. The chances are low. We were just planning a vacation with my whole family, where me and my wife wanted to celebrate 40th anniversary of our marriage. I was looking forward to “pop” the champagne. First thought was that I was upset I had to cancel the vacation. I didn’t

realize then that I should be worried about my life instead.

Pithiness: Let’s be honest. If patient is supposed to wait for arranged exams according to the schedule, many wouldn’t make it. I was never ill, but this time I realized, how many patients don’t get the chance for cure because of the waiting list for their examinations. Every patient expects the terms in the shortest period so they know the prognosis or the treatment plan as soon as possible. First results from biopsy that showed the malignant tumor took half of my energy and will to live. Everyone around was caressing me and telling me to fight, that everything will be ok. I felt like crying, asking myself “why, why me?”. I wanted to spend my time with kids and three grand-kids. I was thinking how to deal with the fact that I’m going to die. I was full of life yesterday, why me, why now?

Either, or...: After finding a surgeon and the right clinics, there came of moment of decision. Where to start? They told me that the most ideal decision is to undergo the surgery and then oncologic treatment. But all results are unsure. Many doctors said that in my case there is no use in surgery. The tumor was so close to aorta. I was already admitted to the hospital. But doctor Christian Bartko, who was not only surgeon but also the director of the National Oncologic Institute in Bratislava, Slovakia, decided to operate. The term was June 16th. Monday. I was the only patient scheduled for the surgery that day. Doctor Bartko came to see me that morning and said honestly that there is possibility that I don’t wake up from the surgery, or that I will wake up with tumor inside me cause there is chance that is inoperable. But the doctor said he will do everything and that the surgery can last for 12 hours. I was so scared I’m even ashamed to admit it. On Sunday I said “good-

bye” to my family, but I wanted to live so much!

The whole family was nervous from the very Monday morning. They were praying not for me but for doctor Bartko and the surgical team. They knew that early call from him would be a bad sign.

And then it happened....At half past twelve the phone rang and doctor Bartko was asking family for permission. The aorta was a problem. Doctor said “if we continue with the surgery and during the surgery we will find out that the tumor affect aorta it could mean that he will bleed out on the table. But it is a decision of family if you want me to continue realizing the risk. If we don’t try, your dad will die within a month.”. That is what he told my daughters. My family had all their faith in him, while they knew his work and devotion for what he is doing so they agreed.

First moment of happiness: At half past seven afternoon with question to what extent can the surgeon go. The family decided they want me to live the rest of short life with all dignity, to the fullest. They quoted me “if he is supposed to wake up with the tumor, then he doesn’t want to live at all”. My family gave permission to operate on the aorta. They were praying at the door of surgical theatre since then. Tears, fear, prayers and kilometres walking up and down the hall. That was the first and only time when the whole team went for a short break with me laying on the surgical table. Doctor Bartko was tired but said to my family that he is sure that he can make it and operate so close to aorta to remove the tumor.

The surgery was not over yet, but at half past eight there was finally a smile on faces of the whole surgical team. “It’s looking good” said the head of surgical department doctor Merasicky to my family “I was sceptic at first cause I never seen oesophagus so damaged, but doctor Bartko is able to take out the whole tumor.”

Sometimes it’s worth to take a risk: The doctors took picture of aortal invasion and showed it to my family. That was at the point when I was laying on the surgical table with my abdomen and thorax opened. The whole family started to walk the halls again. There and back, there and back...

At 10 p.m. doctor Bartko gets a coffee and informs my family that the surgery isn’t over yet but it is going well. He said that he’d never seen something like that. Before the surgery, doctor Bartko told me, that surgery is only half of the success. “You will have to try hard after the surgical treatment to recover, important is the will to live and fight”, I’m remembering those words as I sip on my soup, noodles and bits of vegetables and meat.

Gratitude: The team finished surgery at midnight. 14 hours of sweat, tired, they can go home with the feeling of satisfaction that the overtime was worth it. Doctor Bartko looks at his phone full of unanswered calls and smiles “I know that many people call me to ask for help, but once at the surgical table, my mind is only with that one patient. Nothing else matters. I love my job and there is nothing else I would want to do.” How fascinating, he performed

a miracle. I can’t find the words of gratitude; I can’t explain the admiration to the whole team.

Longest 13 days at ICU with tracheostomy because of complications with breathing, medical induced coma, but...I came back!

I couldn’t talk at the beginning, I was writing notes to my wife and my two daughters. I didn’t want anyone else except my three girls around me. There were moments when I wanted to give up, I felt helpless and hopeless, I couldn’t find the will to live. The motivation came after they moved me from ICU to “normal” patient’s room. That was a big day.

For the first time: I knew it wasn’t over yet. They were feeding me through the tube but the test was coming. They had to check if the surgery was success and I will be able to swallow so they know that the attachment of oesophagus onto the stomach is functional. First try didn’t work out. I started coughing, so they rescheduled for next day. I had to find all the courage to live for my family. Next day, it was Friday, with tears in my eyes I had a first sip of water. Miracle! That day I asked for a sip of beer. I got it. The taste was amazing. And I thought to myself...the road is short, but I am here and I’m going to make the best of it....”

The patient lived for next 16 months. He spent his time relaxing and enjoying the rest of his life at the cottage with family. His daughter remembers the sparks in his eyes as he woke up each day fighting, enjoying each minute he could. He got the chance to live to the fullest with quality life, happily with all his loved ones. And another thing he said “I don’t want to disappoint my doctor.”

In memory of A.G.