

Pulse

THE MEDICAL STUDENT SECTION SUPPLEMENT OF JAMA

THE CLINICAL YEARS

Kleenex

When I graduate from medical school and work in my own office, I'm going to go through a lot of Kleenex. Yesterday I was observing in a clinic at a large, modern hospital. My team had to deliver some bad news to a patient, and I could see that her eyes were starting to leak.

Way back in the first year of medical school, when they were teaching us to interview patients, my class had a big discussion: What do you do if the patient cries? Do you ignore it? Do you stop the interview and leave? Do you stop the interview, comfort them, and then leave? Do you cry too? The best answer was: First you give them Kleenex. As the bad news got badder and badder, and the patient's eyes got redder and redder, I started furtively looking around for the Kleenex. It was my first day on this team and I didn't want to get a reputation for being soft on patients right away.

The nice thing about having Kleenex around is that you can use it as a Geiger counter to find out what's bothering patients. They may come in with something, say, a right elbow that hurts, and their story doesn't quite hang together. But they can't come out with whatever it is. So (if you have time—sigh) you listen to what's going on with the elbow and draw them into random digres-

sions. You listen for the odd pause, you watch their eyes and lower lip, and you play "hotter and colder" until the patient is a twitching mass of nervous sorrow, with a very stiff upper lip. The patient at this point is still congratulating himself or herself on having steely self-control and epic stoicism. This is the time to stop suddenly, look sympathetically at the person, and offer Kleenex. If you have steered them right, and navigated their nonverbal language, as Mr. Sulu does intergalactic space, they will collapse in tears and finally tell you what's going on.

Maybe they think they're dying. Maybe they are. Maybe someone else is. Or maybe their best friend isn't speaking to them. It could be, and has been, a lot of things.

Anyway, I knew what was bothering this patient. My team. And there was no Kleenex in the whole room. Lots of other stuff, some of it very expensive, but no Kleenex. How do you take care of patients without Kleenex? Finally, I discreetly reached over, pulled a paper towel out of the sink dispenser, and handed it to her. She looked up gratefully, and blew her nose. I wonder if Kleenex is deductible as a business expense?

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