



## Family Stories

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*Continuity is a cornerstone of primary care and the essence of family medicine. It is comprehensive care over time and across problems that forms the fabric of our relationships with patients, families and communities.*

Julia was one of my first patients. She was an 18-year-old student at the University and I was a first-year resident at the family medicine clinic. That first visit was for a routine school sports exam physical. I took her past medical history and family history, discussed contraception and immunizations, signed her form and told her I'd be happy to see her back for any concerns about her health. She did come back; she came back for everything. She came back for her health maintenance exams, women's health visits and contraception. She came back for ear infections, sports injuries and the usual variety of skin, musculoskeletal and respiratory problems. She came back for over 20 years.

Julia graduated from college and became a teacher. I graduated from residency and went into practice. She followed me there and I was her family doctor for the next two decades. Over that time, I saw Julia become a wife, a mother, a successful professional and a community leader. Along the way we grew together, person and personal physician, family and family doctor.

Over these years, I saw her through hundreds of doctor-patient encounters, two surgeries, one medical hospitalization and the birth of her three children. I diagnosed her acute appendicitis and assisted on the operation. I delivered her three babies and was the doctor for the whole family. We worked together on marital problems, parenting issues and career concerns.

Julia and her family moved away to another state for two years but when they returned they came back to my practice. They settled in the other end of the city but continued to come to my office for care.

A few years ago, I bumped into the family at the Folk Life Festival. Julia, her husband and three children

were all there together. The tweenage daughter – a baby I had delivered – had a girlfriend along and she introduced me to her saying, "This is Dr. Phillips; He is my doctor."

Family doctors make differences in peoples lives every day but it is an exceptional day when you save a life.

I was on call one night when I answered an urgent phone call to hear a man's terrified voice. "My wife is *really* bleeding. I need to bring her in," was all he had to say. I recognized the voice; I knew the man and his wife. She was 14 weeks pregnant. I knew from taking care of them both for some time that they were reasonable, reliable and usually composed. Based on just these few words, I knew the patient, the diagnosis and the treatment needed. She was having a spontaneous miscarriage complicated by severe vaginal bleeding and she probably needed surgical evacuation of her uterus to stop it. This was a life-threatening emergency.

Jim was already on the way to the hospital and I sped to meet them in the emergency department. I called ahead to alert the staff to prepare the necessary equipment, which was not usually on hand in the emergency room. As I raced through the parking lot, I saw their family car with the door ajar and the passenger's seat full of clotted blood. When I arrived, the nurse was taking her vital signs in the procedure room. I looked over to see a basin on the counter full of more blood.

As soon as I walked in I could see that Jim's wife was in shock. Pale and sweaty, she couldn't sit up in bed without getting dizzy. Her pulse was 120 and her blood pressure was 60. The couple seemed comforted just to see me there. I palpated her uterus at about 20 weeks size; it was filling with more blood. There was no time to take her to the operating room or to call in an anesthesiologist or gynecology consultant. I knew her blood type and ordered a transfusion to start right away.

She needed only a few words of encouragement, explanation and informed consent. Jim nodded his head in agreement. The preliminaries were brief but not short-changed. The critical communication flowed though

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the bond of trust that existed between us, earned over previous visits, crises and babies. Working with a great nurse, we moved right into the procedure. We dilated her cervix and evacuated her uterus. The bleeding came under control, as expected. Her vital signs improved. The crisis was over. Together the three of us – the four of us, including the nurse – reached out to each other with a sigh of relief and a touch of gratitude. We had survived together and now shared an even stronger foundation of understanding and trust.

I haven't been to many patients' funerals. Occasionally, after caring for a patient for many years or over a long illness, I make a special effort to attend the funeral. Sometimes it's for the family; sometimes it's really for me. In either case, it does help reach closure on a life and a relationship.

I will remember one funeral forever. I sat in a strange church in an unfamiliar community. The church was packed with people I didn't know, but the same beautiful sunlight filtered through the stained glass windows and shone onto all of us sitting together in the pews. The service was comforting. I traded smiles with the

guy standing next to me as we both struggled though Amazing Grace.

The family was together and they knew that I was there with them. After the service, one of them came up and gave me a special thank you for coming so far. It was the grandmother, who I had not seen since the delivery room. "You were there when he came into this world and it is right for you to be here when he leaves it," she said. This service recognized the loss of a child I had delivered as a healthy bundle of joy only 14 years before. All funerals are filled with sadness, many with tragedy. Few things are harder than seeing parents bury a child or grandchild. It meant a lot for me to be there.

Threads like these weave the tapestry of our professional lives. Some threads run through the phases of life, connecting the dots related to health and illness. Some threads bind us together through crises and catastrophes. Some run through a life from beginning to end. Sometimes these threads come together to embroider indelible images on our souls. So it is for me with these three stories, they are all about the same family.

## *Thank You!* Drs. Glen Stream and Anne Montgomery

The Washington Academy of Family Physicians bids farewell to Drs. Glen Stream and Anne Montgomery with deep gratitude for their many years of leadership and friendship. We wish them joy, peace, and good fortune in their new home in Rancho Mirage, California.

*Goodbyes are not forever.  
Goodbyes are not the end.  
They simply mean  
we'll miss you  
Until we meet again!*

*~ Author Unknown*

