

Martin G. Mayer

Primum non nocere

Autonomy,
Non-maleficence,
Beneficence:
Binding principles
That sometimes leave us bound.

“I have an admission for you—”

African-American female, late eighties,
Failing heart, failing kidneys,
In the hospital more than not,
Recently diagnosed with terminal cancer,
Already can't swallow from a previous stroke,
Bedbound, fed through a tube in her stomach,
Functionally mute, severe dementia—

“She's a full code.”

Family members have made up their minds;
They don't want to revisit it.
Now I'm functionally muted.
I talk with her as though she understands—
But am I talking with her or just to her?
I try to read her eyes;
I feel illiterate.

I leave her room deeply conflicted;
She's on my mind throughout my shift.

Then, it happens:
She codes—

We go through the motions,
We don't hold back.
We respect the family's wishes—

But are they hers?

Is this autonomy?
Non-maleficence?
Beneficence?

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