

THE ULTIMATE HEALER

December 4 was a significant day for me, as I fractured my spine 1 year ago to date. It is a day that could have drastically changed my life, and, in some ways, it did—fortunately, for the better. I have learned so much from the experience and want to share my reflections on and gratitude for it.

On December 4, 2021, I was on a boat in the Atlantic Ocean with colleagues and friends while on a surgical trip in Panama. Out on the water, the weather worsened, and the seas became rough. I was fixing a door on the boat when a huge wave hit us. I flew back at least 6 feet in the air and landed with my lower back hitting the fiberglass side of the boat. I instantly felt severe pain and could barely move.

I didn't want to inconvenience anyone, but I knew something wasn't right. I sat there, unsure of what to do and not wanting to impose on my friends. Eventually, they saw my condition, and they insisted that we head back to shore. They arranged the best care possible and jumped into action to coordinate all of the logistics to get to the hospital. Honestly, I may not have gone if it weren't for my friends pushing me, accompanying me, and taking great care of me. After reaching land and driving 2.5 hours to the nearest hospital, I was assessed by a spinal surgeon who kindly came in on his weekend day off.

Several twists and turns ensued. Initially, no fracture was reported. The next day, upon reassessment, it turned out that I did indeed have a serious spinal fracture. My emotions went from major relief to extreme fear. I felt I could try to fight the pain; but, to know this fracture—although not causing any neurological deficits or cord impingement—was at serious risk of progressing to such stopped me in my tracks. I had a T12 compression fracture, and about one-third of the vertebral body was cavitated. I was told that there was a risk the fracture was unstable and could move, causing damage to my spinal cord. I had to be extremely careful, wear a very awkward and limiting brace, and was not allowed to do any bending, lifting, exercising, or running for at least 3 months.

I flew home from Panama sitting awkwardly on a 5-hour flight in a brace. The woman seated beside me could see that I was in pain, and she talked to me to distract me (and still checks in on me to this day). I arrived home at midnight to my worried family and tried to sleep as best as I could. I wondered if I should take time off from work, but I had a big day ahead: Orbis International was hosting an event to train doctors in the developing world, and I had organized a Cybersight live surgery. Colleagues around the world would be logging in to watch. I wore my brace in the OR and was fortunate to be able to do the surgery while trying to ignore the pain. The event went perfectly, but that day I also realized that I was walking abnormally and feeling pain in my right foot. An X-ray showed I had a minor foot fracture.

Despite sustaining these injuries and wearing a brace all day, I was fortunate not to miss a day of surgery. Although I was in terrible pain, I decided not to take pain medications, as I wanted to maintain a sharp focus in taking care of my patients. I did not want to become dependent on them, and I wanted to try to fight this in my own way.

Mentally, I still needed to be active, so I walked every day in those winter months, some days up to 20 km. Sometimes I would call friends to talk, and I will never forget those who were there to support me. Over time, people would call to book time to talk on the phone during



my walks; then people started asking to walk with me—trainees, colleagues, neighbors, and even strangers. It was an amazing experience. My back hurt and was super stiff. I was limping because of my broken right foot and compensating with my left leg. Unfortunately, I then developed a left tibial stress fracture, and it became painful to walk. I developed sores and cuts on my feet, but I refused to stop. I had to go very slowly and cover a shorter distance. I felt I needed this—a challenge that I could feel I was facing rather than sitting and waiting.

Life carried on, and I walked, talked, and slowly recovered. After 6 months, my pain reduced, my back became less stiff, and I was able to get back to working out and running and resume my normal activity.

What lessons did I learn from this experience? Mostly, they center on gratitude. I was lucky to be able to still help my patients during this time, and I was fortunate that the people around me took great care of me. They pushed me to take care of myself, something I admittedly have not been good about. All my life, I have been resistant to impose on people or ask for help. But I now realize that this tendency deprives those around us from having the chance to feel needed and to develop closer relationships and deeper connections.

Knowing how horrendous and life-altering these injuries can be, I was very fortunate to eventually come out of this without major long-term issues. Every day I thank God for blessing me with a return to my health and for giving me a challenge to overcome.

I am grateful that I could experience health care from the patient's perspective and feel firsthand the vulnerabilities of being a patient. I saw how important compassion and empathy are in the treatment and recovery process, and I hope this experience makes me a better doctor.

Some of us live for challenges and adrenaline rushes, although I did not envision or desire one like this! These obstacles are as physical as they are mental, and it is incredible how passion and perseverance can help us to overcome some of the biggest hurdles and deficits. Life is full of challenges, setbacks, failures, and struggles. Learning and rebuilding from them is a gift, and the ability to recover is a blessing. Most of all, the power of the love, support, and kindness of others is the ultimate healer.

One year later, in many ways, I have moved on from my spinal fracture. However, I will never forget what I learned from the experience and the people who went on this journey with me. It truly has been a kind of rebirth, and reinventing oneself is the true essence of living. ■

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