

MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives*

Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor

My Understanding of Being an Anesthesiologist

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My childhood dream was to be a doctor. To fulfill it, I took a 5-year undergraduate degree in traditional Chinese medicine. But after all that training and education, I became an anesthesiologist instead. The great people, Mr. Sun Yat-sen and Mr. Lu Xun, both used to be doctors. They gave up the profession of medicine because they felt they were needed more in other places. Indeed, they both made remarkable achievements in their chosen fields. The former became the forerunner of the Chinese democratic revolution, and the latter became the most distinguished writer in modern Chinese history. For similar reasons, I changed my major field from traditional Chinese medicine to anesthesiology. Will I also accomplish great things in the future?

What motivated me to shift my focus was an event that occurred during my internship. While working in the Division of Thoracic Surgery, I had the thrill of participating in a thoracoscopic lobectomy with an esteemed visiting surgeon. After more than one hour, we finally removed one side of lung and stitched up the wound. With the last stitch, the thoracic surgery expert from Beijing asked the anesthesiologist to perform a lung inflation test. The expert said in an assured manner, "A good thoracic surgeon would never allow an air leakage to occur." As expected, the lung inflation test showed there was no air bubble in the lung. But halfway through the process of closing the chest, the anesthesiologist suddenly said, "Stop closing! The ventilator is warning that there's a leak." Indeed, a series of

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examinations indicated that there was indeed an air leakage of 400 ml/min from the patient's lung. The expert became distressed and reopened the chest by himself. What he discovered confirmed what the anesthesiologist had expected: when the expert's assistant had suctioned out the last sterile saline, after the inflation test, he accidentally tore the sutured area.

Most people suppose that an anesthesiologist's only job is to inject patients with drugs that induce sleep. But this is a misunderstanding of our profession. The most important responsibility of an anesthesiologist is to insure his/her patients' safety—before, during, and after operations. In a way, an anesthesiologist is the Patron Saint of patients' lives.

The life of a patient is so vulnerable when he or she is on an operating table. Throughout the entire surgery, we must keep watching over the patient, not just alleviating the pain, but also regulating vital signs and handling any unexpected condition. We do our best to protect the life of every patient. Our professional expertise, strong sense of responsibility and tough mentality will bring patients security and hope. We use our eyes, ears, brain, and heart to feel the patient's breathing, heartbeat, pulse, and blood flow.

After all these years as an anesthesiologist, I realize that my sense of achievement does not come from dealing with critically ill patients, but from doing the most ordinary thing thousands of times, each time without a mistake.