

## Helpless in Healing

By Stephanie Braunthal, OMS-III

One of the things that attracted me to medicine was the idea of being an expert. Physicians are the keepers of the diagnoses and treatments, relied on by even the most important people in the world. With that said, I have come to realize that this power dynamic is a relatively superficial. While we may be able to treat illness, healing is less in our control.

I was inspired to write this piece after a rough encounter in the clinic last week. A patient came in who has been labeled “the least compliant patient in the office.” A type-II diabetic in his late-30s, he refuses to take his insulin, metformin, and anti-hypertensives in any structured way. He consistently comes in with outrageous blood sugars and blood pressure readings, and that day was no different. We found him lying on the exam table, fatigued and aimless. The patient lamented that he knew he should be doing better, exercising more and eating more healthily. He complained of erectile dysfunction, a side effect of uncontrolled diabetes, and requested Viagra. When asked why he wouldn't just take his medications as prescribed, he provided a litany of excuses and said he lacked motivation. The patient has a gambling addiction, and admitted that the only drive he had was to go to the casino on weekends, where he was consistently losing money. I proposed several tangible methods for maintaining medication compliance; shared a personal story about a death of a family member who didn't take care of himself and also had a gambling addiction; I even suggested that he would likely gamble better if he maintained his health and cognition. My preceptor flat-out told the patient he was going to die, to no effect. In the face of mortality and acknowledgement of the effects on his family, he still rejected all help.

Later that day, I was on the phone with a girlfriend who continues to have trouble getting over a former relationship, and again I found myself frustrated that someone was not taking my advice. It was only then that I realized that healing is not just the job of the doctor, it is also the job of the patient. This epiphany was based on my own personal experiences. My sprained ankle only heals when I ice and brace it. My cold only heals when I stay home and sleep. My broken heart only heals when I am willing to let go.

As osteopathic medicine teaches us, the body has the innate ability to heal itself. With our sutures, medications, and advice, physicians have the ability to expedite the process and minimize complications. We are not helpless. But we are only aids, not masters. As such, we must remember to educate our patients to be our partners, for they are the ones who truly hold the power over their health.