



About Death and Some other Surprise

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I usually don't relax too much between surgeries, but on that rainy morning, I felt like going to the old library in the living room. More than a library, it was a small room, with a wooden bookcase, varnished almost reluctantly, tall and narrow, in which books and magazines seemed to cling to each other so as not to fall. I wanted to look for a copy of a cohort study by Lancet in Spanish. I crossed the icy corridor leading to the second floor of that room and I saw an assistant, his face distraught, pushing a stretcher with a recently deceased patient. He gave me some details. To my surprise, I saw that she was the patient from the operating room next to mine. While I was operating on a cruciate ligament, I had seen through a window how the medical personnel were struggling to save her life.

I returned to my second surgery of the morning, without having consulted what I was looking for. That night, I had trouble falling asleep. Go with death, almighty. We doctor fight against her and it cannot not be any other way because the classic Hippocratic Oath reminds us to ensure the health of our patient. Losing one's health (patients and doctors alike) can sometimes lead to death. How many colleagues have had death snatch a patient away from them? Many I believe, and not because of lack of care or passion for our work, but because sometimes death emerges as an invincible monster. Regarding passion, Nobel Prize for Literature winner Elías Canetti tells us "death conquers us due to a lack of passion". What a phrase! Passion and passions can be different: the tirade of a manager to his sales team, the passion for meditation and detachment practiced by a Buddhist or the passion of Ernest Hemingway's character in the novel "The Old Man and the Sea" [1].

Undoubtedly, medical colleagues can have many passions and loads of stories about losing patients. What could we add to the loss? What's more, I wonder if the patients that I stopped seeing a long time ago are still alive. Canetti's book, "The Book against Death", [2] full of sublime phrases, refers to the irreparable power of death when he mentions The Exterminating Angel who steals the key to your life. Life that will then become bone and ash, a testimony, a memory, something that goes elsewhere, or perhaps nowhere. And those who escaped death? There are also stories

such as of the girl who was buried alive at age 17. The passion of her sister, who opened the coffin to check on her and rescue her, bent the hand of fate. That girl, who later became a nun, died at a ripe, old age many years later, after having lived two lives. Hemingway himself was a survivor of two world wars, as well as of his personal dramas [3].

I cannot forget in this article to mention the story of Doctor Eben Alexander, whose experience with death became a best seller. In the book, "The Test of Heaven", [4] which reached number 1 in sales in the New York Times, he tells us how he, a leading neurosurgeon doctor, fell into a coma for several days. A rare meningitis caused by *Escherichia coli* left him unconscious and with no brain function. The latter elements are very important when considering what is understood as death. The return to life of Doctor Alexander was sudden and astonishing for everyone. His shocking and revealing trip, outside the borders of this world (or outside of his conscience) is captured in that book. Life does not end with death, he says. Death, in this case, took a special leave or a strange vacation.

What is the ambition of medicine? As I said in previous paragraphs, to prolong human life in a better way and fight to take away death's share of power. We fail sometimes, of course.

Returning to Canetti and the passion that is fading ..., which leaves death with a resounding triumph; we must be precise with his words. His impaired passion does not speak of a lack of effort, but speaks of the passion in maintaining the memory alive of a dead man and to regret his departure. That is a passion that should not bow down nor falter, until the miracle of the resurrection occurs, like Lazarus. Not everyone will have the same fate as he did, but we will try [5,6].

Some days, something similar to what Canetti says in a paragraph happens to me. I get up with an uncomfortable feeling of not wanting more. When he wrote it, he was over 80 years old. I am a good handful of years away of getting close to that age. I suppose that when I reach it, I will hold on tightly to life and perhaps to divinity. I will treasure my precious memories and my children. Maybe in that future hour, other doctors will take care of

me as a patient. I will try to do so without fear, as the philosophy of Epicurus says: while we are ..., death is not present, and, when death occurs ..., we no longer exist. Very late at night, I dreamed that death invited me for a drink. I received it with pleasure from his long, skeletal fingers. He stood up and with a dazzling smile, said: "See you doctor, I will visit other places and then I will take a vacation".

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