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At Dr Bernard's suggestion, I would like to share with you a poem I wrote. I submitted it to the American Society on Aging's poetry contest, held as part of the ASA's annual meeting. It won honorable mention. It will be published in the fall edition of [Blood and Thunder](#), the OU medical students' journal.

After starting on the ECU in January I wrote it one evening while out at dinner. I think that one of the biggest gaps in contemporary medicine in treating older persons is the failure to recognize that the family is the unit of treatment. We must address the suffering of the caregivers as well as address the suffering of the old person in bed who is our patient. The hospice benefit recognizes this concept and so does good long term care—as seen in the ECU's deliberate involvement of caregivers at special Friday morning sessions.

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Caring for the Family

You see, it only takes
One incapacitation
To change the locus of control
from "the patient" to
"the family."

Then the trainees,
Barely able,
in the middle of their
testosterone storm,
Barely able
to elicit the facts
from the competent, yet pale
 the insured, yet scared
 the educated, yet inarticulate
Must Face
The patient's family.

No one ever told them
"the family is the unit of treatment."
No one ever told them

the inner meaning of this aphorism:
That it is not enough to recognize
The hair askew but beads still in place—
(sure signs of Dr. Alzheimer's visit),
but to sit and talk with the family, too.

Passing by the family altogether
to work on the patient in bed
They do not understand
the family's anger
which broadsides them next.

They do not recognize, at first,
That anger is the flip side of pain.

They mistake it for the anger,
born of ennui
and an imperfect motley system of care,
that the attending physicians,
on their bad hair days,
intermittently fling *at them*,
like kicking the dog.

So they do not understand
Late in the night
When no one is there
That the anger is born of the
Frustration of seeing Mother
melt away.

Unconsciously rekindling
Sibling Rivalry Rage
from the parents' attention
shifting to their new child and away from
them.

The trainees in the night
Do not understand
How worn out, tired, peevisish and irritable
The family has become,
worn down by the
grinding weight of care.

The trainees have never read Dale
Carnegie—
“never argue, never criticize”
and try to defend themselves,
when a strategic retreat
would shield them better.

Then comes the dawn
and the mentor comes,
Older, graying, and scarred,
like a turtle who has sailed the ocean.

He has buried his friends
and cried in the night.

Who, with a few gentle words says:
It's been hard, hasn't it?
You've done such a good job caring for
Mother.
and reduces the family to cleansing tears.

Then, in the stale unshaven morning of
the day after the night before,
the young learn from the older:

The mingling of caring and dispassion.
The magic meaning of empathy.

And, in the mid-morning sun, the words:
“a soft answer turneth away wrath” take on a
new meaning.

The next day, refreshed by sleep
the episode focuses itself.

Of caring for The Suffering
The suffering of the family;
For relief of suffering

Is the aim of Medicine.