

I'm losing my patients.

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The blank death certificate sits in front of me, housed in its bland beige pad. No matter where a life starts, where it journeys, the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death is the concluding punctuation mark on a person's medical narrative.

I approach the completion of the death certificate with reverence. My final task in the care of a patient. A moment to pause. Reflect. Say goodbye. To honor their life within the rigid confines of a bureaucratic document.

This ritual is becoming increasingly frequent.

As a GP in a rural area for thirty years, my patients have grown older with me. Despite medicine's advances and my best efforts, they are dying. It is their time. As my wise grandmother taught me before she died, "*Mein lieber Gott vergisst niemanden. My dear God forgets no one.*"

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Just last month, I lost three.

Lilly was an elegant matriarch. She was my oldest patient. Each of her frequent visits to me ended with her gently touching my arm and saying "*Bless you Hilton*". I had cared for her husband Don before his death. Now it was Lilly's turn. Her heart was failing. "*I hope that one night I will go to sleep and wake up dead. Just like Don did*". Her wish came true a few weeks ago. Who is going to bless me now?

Len had been a child during the bombings of London during the war. I had once ruined his Christmas by advising that he go to hospital to have a heart pacemaker inserted. He would have died without it. He wasn't ready for that. The pacemaker kept him going for another decade. Not always easy years. But "*better than the alternative*". Len was a poet. Each visit to me was accompanied by the gift of a poem, "*from when the muse was upon me*". The last time I saw him he told that he was feeling better than he had for years. Another gift. He woke up dead a few days later.

Reg's children and grandchildren were patients of mine. When Reg moved to our town with his wife, they became my patients too. Reg was a lovable rogue with a wicked sense of humor. He was fiercely independent. Unflinchingly loyal to his wife, who had advancing dementia, shielding her from "*interfering do-gooders*". Reg dropped dead at home without warning. Out of sight beside his bed. It took two days for his family to discover what had happened, as in his wife's mind, he was just out doing the shopping. The police called me when his body was discovered. I am haunted by the memory of seeing him lying face down on the floor, so very very very dead.

I finish writing the death certificate. I walk out to greet my next patient. The waiting room is full. Many familiar faces look my way. I am troubled by a nagging thought. A persistent pestering question. "*I wonder who'll be next?*"