

## **Is there a doctor in the house?**

**By Susan C. Lynch**

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She had been declining rapidly over the past few weeks. She was less responsive to his familiar voice and his patient attempts to feed her. He would gently stroke her chin and throat to encourage her to chew, but she would gaze off, face frozen, no longer chewing or meeting his eyes. Her eyes are the window to her soul, and increasingly her only remaining form of communication. “Maybe dinner will go better for her,” he would mutter nervously to himself. He existed somewhere between reality and hope.

She is my mother – a ninety year old woman struck by Alzheimer’s Disease over a decade ago. She lives in Fall River, Massachusetts, an old New England mill town where she was born, where she finished high school, and where she met and married my father in 1952. He is my ninety-one year old father who also grew up in Fall River. He served in World War II, went to college on the GI Bill, and then returned to his hometown to manage a local commercial loan business. They have shared their entire lives together – eating dinner every night at six, walking their boxer dog, and talking. They loved to talk about the news, the dog, the house, and me – to share their thoughts. They are true life partners who shared everything in perfect harmony and symbiosis until my mother started to slip away and stopped being able to share at the same level. Their conversation gradually went silent but their eyes still engaged, until that

time in December 2011 when my mother began to rapidly decline. That winter, my father and I were frightened that we could be approaching an abrupt and painful end to my mother's beautiful life. We called my mother's neurologist Dr. James Lisak. We wanted his advice on what was left to do.

Over the many years that our family has struggled with Alzheimer's Disease, Dr. Lisak has been the one trustworthy, reliable force in this devastating journey. He has counseled our family as we moved painfully through each stage of the disease. This committed and compassionate doctor came to our house on numerous occasions – in an era where house calls have fallen victim to a broken reimbursement system. Dr. Lisak came to our home when my mother needed primary care services, as well as neurology services. He came to treat the person and the family and not just the disease. He seemed to be guided at each step by strong ethical principles and respect for the dignity of my mother's tenuous life.

Dr. Lisak came to our home this day in December as soon as we called him about my mother's decline and her new inability to chew and swallow. Dr. Lisak examined my mother gently, respectfully, methodically. He reported to us that she was in the end stages of the disease but that we still had some reason to hope. He developed the plan that we would test my mother for a UTI because this common infection could precipitate a rapid decline, and that we would treat my mother with Ritalin to hopefully stimulate her eating response. He counseled us gently to consider the many decisions that could be close ahead but challenged us to remain hopeful that we could push beyond this setback.

The next day, we learned that my mother, in fact, had a UTI and we started her on antibiotics and Ritalin. We did push through that dark period. Today, more than one year later, my mother is very much alive, eating, chewing and smiling at my father. They have returned to their life of conversation which now consists of a knowing look, smile, and an assuring nod. A precious communication channel that I hope continues for years to come.

Dr. Lisak is a community hero. He has taken the elderly of our community under his wing and he sees their health and well being as his personal responsibility. He treats his patients and their families with dignity and respect and he has a compassionate yet realistic approach to life and death. These fundamental values often get lost, or go unnoticed, in our complex health care delivery system. But here, Dr. Lisak reminds us that for two people in a New England town, like for all of us, some of the most important qualities in a health care provider are responsiveness, trustworthiness, and compassion. These are the pillars upon which good health care rest.