

Mother's Close Call

At the beginning of the 1971/72 academic year I was admitted to the Oda Secondary School. With my admission to the second cycle school my dream of studying medicine received a big boost. Why medicine?

Well, since the time I was big enough to reason, long before the problems with my left ankle began, my desire was to become a doctor. The human suffering I witnessed around me played a significant role to influence my decision. The reader might recall what I mentioned at the beginning in regard to the difficulties citizens of my village faced in bringing the sick to hospital. Added to the general situation were several particular incidents that had a lasting impact on me and which contributed to my decision to study medicine.

For example, one day as we walked home from school, four people carrying someone on a makeshift stretcher emerged from a bush path that linked some of the surrounding farmlands to the main road. As we learnt from them, the man they were carrying had been bitten by a snake whilst working on his farm about one kilometre away. After tying a rope some distance to the affected site on his left leg, they decided to carry him to the main road in the hope that they would find a vehicle that would transport the injured man to the hospital at Nkawkaw. Our ways parted, for we were heading in different directions—but during the following several days the scene recurred in my mind. The question that preoccupied my mind for some time was whether they ever make it to the hospital. And if so, were the doctors able to save him?

Then there was the case of Dugiri, the young girl aged about ten years who nearly bled to death from a serious cutlass wound to her right thigh! As blood oozed profusely from her vessels, the alarmed villagers instinctively tied a cord firmly above the wound in a desperate attempt to stop or at least to minimise the loss of blood.

'Dear God, please send a vehicle to transport her to hospital!' we prayed. We waited and waited. The agony in her eyes reflected the pain she was going through. Oh, what a pitiful sight to behold! Hardly anyone could hold back the tears.

Finally, after waiting more than an hour, a truck came by and was hailed. Today, as I write, I know it was not the best of vehicles to use to transport a person in that state of health. But away with luxurious fantasies—we were just overjoyed at the opportunity of bringing the much loved young girl to the attention of the doctors at Nkawkaw! And, thankfully, Dugiri survived the near-death encounter and eventually returned, after about two weeks of hospitalisation, to ahero's welcome.

Then came my own personal experience with my left leg. If only to satisfy my own curiosity, I vowed to become a doctor in order to understand the mysterious ailment that nearly brought an end to my own education.

Every indecision in this regard was swept away by an event that occurred in August 1968. It happened at a time when the pains from my leg had subsided just sufficiently to allow me to walk a considerable distance without the need for any walking aid. Mother, who had not been feeling well for the past days, decided, despite her poor health, to visit one of our farms to harvest food for the family. We did all we could to persuade her to stay at home.

'How can I do that?' she countered. 'You are all aware there is not enough food for the family!' 'We shall manage!' we chorused. 'We will purchase some on the market.'

‘Where is the money?’

‘But we can buy on credit!’

‘We will still have to repay, wouldn’t we?’ She shook her head. ‘Don’t be too concerned about me. I will make it.’

Mother was an iron-willed person who, once she had made up her mind, didn’t change it easily. It became clear to us that we would not get her to reverse her decision. Schools were on holiday at that time. One or two healthy members of the family could have accompanied her. For reasons that I can no longer recall everyone found an excuse not to do so.

At that time the trouble with my left ankle had subsided to the extent that I could walk a considerable distance without encountering severe pains. Because no one wanted to do so, I decided to accompany her.

This particular farm was located about five kilometres away from the village. About a quarter of the distance was along a lorry road. We could walk along it without fear of being knocked by traffic. As I mentioned earlier, traffic along it was sparse. Besides that, the nature of the road did not allow vehicles to travel fast. Usually, we heard the sound of an approaching vehicle minutes before it got to where we were—giving us enough time to enable us to ‘park’ ourselves comfortably and safely on the sides of the road.

The rest of the walk to the farm was by way of a bush path. Towards the end of the walk to the farm I noticed a considerable deterioration in mother’s condition. She would increasingly stand still for a while and pant for breath.

‘You are not well; we better return home before things become too bad,’ I advised her.

‘You are right,’ she agreed. ‘Since we are almost there, however, let’s go ahead. When we get there, I will hurry and harvest some foodstuffs. We will then return home without delay.’

Finally we got to our destination. As she had promised, she hurried to harvest some foodstuffs. Just as we were to embark on the return journey, her feet could hardly carry her.

‘Sit down and rest for a while,’ I urged her. She agreed.

After resting about ten minutes, she turned to me. ‘Help me get the load on my head.’

‘Let’s leave it. The strong one will come pick it up tomorrow.’

‘You help me get it on my head.’

‘But that must be too much for you!’

‘Don’t worry. I shall manage it. We have to get some food for the home!’

I only wished I could carry the load myself! But I couldn’t. Walking the distance there had brought about an intensification of my own problem. Mother remained adamant, so I had no choice but to help lift the load to her head. We set out to return home.

She could walk only slowly. On more than half a dozen occasions she stood still for a while to gasp for breath. I prayed to God to give her enough strength to make it home. The thought of her collapsing and perhaps even dying before we could reach home caused my whole being to shiver.

Normally the bush path was quite frequented by others who had their farmlands along it. I prayed for some strong men to come by to carry her home. On that particular day, however, the whole world seemed to have deserted us.

On and on we went, iron-willed mother not prepared, for the sake of her children, and despite the severity of her condition, to abandon the load she was carrying.

Even to this day I cannot explain how she managed to make it home!

Finally, about two hours after we set out on the walk home, we reached the compound of our home. 'Children, you help me get the load off my head!' mother cried as she began to fall to the ground. All those present rushed to her aid, in time to get the load off her head before she collapsed and fell to the ground. Before long she lost consciousness!

There is a common belief in our culture that just at the moment when a person faints, the indwelling soul emerges from the individual to set out on the journey to the land of the dead. It is commonly believed that the departing soul can at that juncture be persuaded to reconsider the decision to leave the land of the living for the dead—if people ran in all directions and shouted at the top of their voices the name of the dying, saying something that might persuade the soul to reconsider his or her decision to leave.

With that thinking at the back of our minds we set out to do two things simultaneously. One group attended to her directly by pouring cold water on her (a common practice in the village, applied to anyone who fainted, notwithstanding the underlying causes), whilst the other run hither and thither shouting her name and saying things like: Why do you want to leave us alone? Where are you heading for? For the sake of your children, in particular for the sake of Afia Serwaa (our youngest sister was barely three years old at that time) reconsider your decision to depart for the land of the dead!

Because of her generosity, kind-heartedness, sense of humour and plain talk, mother had grown to become one of the most loved residents of the village. The news of her illness spread like wildfire through the small settlement. Soon almost the entire village was assembled in our home.

Papa Osei, who had a close relationship with our family, hurried to the scene. On seeing the situation he hurried for the woods. A few minutes later he emerged, carrying some herbs in his hands. At his instructions they were ground into a fine mixture. Next, he pressed out some drops of green liquid from it into the eyes and ears of the dying.

We waited anxiously for her condition to improve. To our delight she opened her eyes after a while and began to murmur some words, though inaudible. Despite that sign of life, her condition remained very grave indeed. Father realised the need to get her to hospital. After consulting a couple of well-to-do citizens of the village, he was able to raise enough of a loan to enable her to be sent to hospital.

As in the case of Dugiri, we were faced with the problem of finding a means of transporting her there. After waiting several minutes, a vehicle heading for Nkawkaw stopped at the village. Our joy was short-lived, for the vehicle was almost completely filled with passengers. Only a couple of seats were unoccupied whereas a sick person could only be transported in the supine position and needed more space.

Some of the passengers, on hearing about the seriousness of mother's condition, volunteered to interrupt their journey to make room for her!

Finally, about three hours after she first collapsed, the vehicle carrying her was set in motion. Father and one close relative accompanied her. Hardly any of us could sleep that night. We prayed and hoped for her recovery. Mother was the pillar of the family. How could we make it without her?

Our prayer was heard. After spending nearly two weeks in hospital she was discharged in good health. By then my mind was completely made up. I would become a doctor—not only to understand all that was behind my own sickness, but also in order to be able to help relieve the suffering around me.

My young mind began to fantasize about a kind of Hospital-on-Wheels that would move from village to village to provide medical care for the inhabitants.

Copyright Robert Peprah-Gyamfi © 2019