

Normal changes of hairlines, skin folds, and wrinkles are one thing, but concerns about illness, real or imagined, are another. Midlife is a time when we begin to acknowledge the reality of our physical frailty. We begin to see family, friends, or colleagues who are diagnosed with real and sometimes terrible diseases. For many, this is an entirely new experience. When in our twenties and told of a death related to breast cancer, we are saddened and move on, but when we are in our forties and are presented with that news, it becomes more personal and real. Self-reflection increases with age and, along with it, health concerns, which may become magnified and frightening.

Health professionals often find fiction, films, and nonmedical essays useful for providing perspectives and insights about patient concerns. Fear of a particular disease such as cancer, especially when suffered by a friend or family member, can cause tremendous stress and anxiety. An example of this is seen in a remarkable and very useful poem by Larry Smith entitled "Leaning Together in a Storm." The story concerns a group of midlife and older men, prostate cancer survivors, who meet regularly as a support group. A young bristly surgeon, obviously not touched by cancer himself, comes to speak to the group, offering slide images and information about therapies, but offering no empathy, support, or gentle kindness to the group of cancer survivors. As the narrator begins, there is a camaraderie in the Cancer Center room among the twelve men in shirtsleeves sipping ice water and making jokes while waiting for the evening's program to begin.

I am one of them tonight  
meant to acknowledge  
our story within  
our private brotherhood.<sup>12</sup>

Later, when their speaker, a young surgeon, strides into the room, the warm spirit of the meeting changes from an intimate gathering to one that is more brittle:

We swallow a hundred nightmares  
with smiles and nods.<sup>12</sup>

The poem continues with the narrator and others asking personal questions about sex and intercourse. The speaker, seemingly oblivious to the feelings of the men in his audience, responds with flip answers that are cold, callous, and thoughtless. In the end, the men, as a group, "let it go, trade our feeling for facts we already know."<sup>12</sup>

Health professionals reading the poem may or may not know physicians such as this, but they would understand the importance of sensitivity and caring in such a setting if a healthy relationship between care provider and patient is to be established.

Breast cancer has become a source of fear for many midlife women. This reality and the emotions that the disease evokes in a patient are presented poignantly in Ronna Wineberg's short story "A Crossing." This work explores a health professional as patient, this time Alice, who has found a lump in her breast. She is forced to continue to carry out her patient care duties, but is unable to repress thoughts about the care she may require. When her fears are realized and she must undergo surgery, she approaches the event and

preparations leading to it with her customary, matter-of-fact, efficient physician attitude. This has served her well as a doctor, but prevents her from accepting her own illness. She tries to keep her cancer at a distance. She must juggle the busy responsibilities of her midlife concerns—patients and her family—while attending to the preparations for her surgery and her own physical and emotional needs. Alice's world and perceptions are changed forever as a result of her diagnosis. The story provides important insights for us as health professionals, teachers, and as patients. Alice must navigate her own process of acceptance, first briefly resenting her husband's good health, and then finally accepting her diagnosis and illness. Ultimately, she faces her breast cancer with sadness, dignity, and grace, thinking after her surgery, "She wasn't really lucky; she hadn't returned to any world she knew. But it was what she had."<sup>13</sup>

## Family Shifts

Another relevant topic for further exploration by health professionals concerns shifts that occur in family care structures. Midlife patients who now care for or are concerned about their own aging parents present frequently with physical and emotional stress. The "sandwich generation" of midlife boomers, tasked with taking care of their own minor children as well as their elderly parents, is often subject to significant emotional, physical, and financial burdens. Many patients fail to acknowledge the toll that these new responsibilities take upon themselves, their spouses, and families, whereas others may feel the need to express their exasperations about these burdens to their own care providers.

Even when financial security is in place, generational tensions cannot be avoided. An obvious illustration occurs in the film *Driving Miss Daisy*,<sup>14</sup> in which a prosperous middle-aged son (Dan Ackroyd) and his very obstinate mother, an aging Jewish widow (Jessica Tandy), deal with the realities and constraints associated with becoming older. Although the tone is light and easy at the onset of the story, the mother gradually declines in health and her determined and valiant struggle for privacy and independence fails. The mother is forced to submit to circumstances she can no longer control. The son is caught between his own wife, who is not especially fond of the starchy old woman, and the mother he cares for and loves. As arranged by the son, the hired chauffeur (Morgan Freeman) begins to assume, over a period of twenty years, the role of family member and trusted friend.

*One True Thing*,<sup>15</sup> a film based on Anna Quindlen's novel, deals with the unpredictable kinds of burdens, exasperations, and discoveries that frequently happen when grown children have an opportunity to reassess family relationships and childhood experiences. The perspective is that of Ellen (Renée Zellweger), a young woman at a pivotal point in her career as a journalist in New York City. When her mother (Meryl Streep) is diagnosed with an especially pernicious form of cancer, Ellen's world is turned upside down. After unsuccessful efforts to hold on to her hard-earned job and oversee her mother's care from afar, she is pressured by her own feelings and those imposed strongly by her father to leave her promising position in the city. The father's work as a professor and writer—he has been