

counterparts: care at the end of life

Danika Leung recently completed her fellowship in palliative care in Canada



Early in medical school, I became friends with Elaine.¹ Elaine had just been diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer and was searching for hope, peace, and meaning in the face of her terminal diagnosis. She did not have any spiritual background, but she had seen our church advertising an Alpha Course, and walked in. Shortly after, I witnessed her come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and finish her life journey without guilt or fear. Elaine's 'Celebration of Life' service held at our church included a video she had recorded prior to her death. In it, she shared that she would not have traded away her cancer as she encountered Jesus Christ because of it.

As I watched her video, I heard the Lord nudging on my heart, 'Danika, never in the 20 years you have been attending this church have this many

non-Christians entered the building to hear the gospel for the first time. Don't ever think that I can't use even someone who is dying to further my kingdom. A life is precious to me until the last breath. Today I have used Elaine to share the gospel with more people than you have in your entire life.'

With God's help, I graduated from medical school and completed my fellowship in palliative care. I currently work as a palliative care consultant in hospitals and patients' homes. I've also had the opportunity to work at a harm reduction house that takes in homeless palliative patients with addictions – to give them a home and 'family' in their last days to months of life. Sometimes I like to think this house is a place Jesus would have loved to visit, filled with



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individuals Jesus would have shared a conversation and meal with. This was a career path I never thought I would end up in, but now I cannot think of a job that I am more passionate about.

Each person faces a terminal diagnosis very differently. Some turn to anger and hate. Some embrace it quickly and change their life priorities to make the most of their final days. Most, at some point, feel lost and vulnerable. I get to help patients and families navigate the last chapter of their life journey, transforming it from a time of fear to one of security and meaning. More importantly, I get to show Christ's love to those on that crossroads (between heaven and hell) before they step into eternity.

Yet, there are days when it is not easy. Seeing people dying every day can take an emotional and mental toll. But for the Christian doctor, the greater tragedy is seeing people die every day without accepting Christ as Lord and saviour – which the Bible tells us is the only way to eternal life. Living in a society that values pluralistic truth, there is significant pressure to keep silent about our own faith convictions at work. In addition, in 2015, Canada legalised assisted suicide (locally termed 'MAiD' – Medical Assistance in Dying). For those of us that continue to believe that only the Creator God has authority over the time of our death, this legislation weighs very heavy on us as our patients request this service. The message God imprinted on my heart at Elaine's funeral continues to remind me of the infinite worth of each life to him, and steadies my resolve to persevere in following God rather than society.

Along with the challenges, this is also a season of opportunity. We do not understand God's full intention for the pandemic we are currently living through. But certainly, it is breaking the self-sufficient attitude of North Americans. Foreseeable death often brings an existential crisis which is not just a reality my palliative patients face, but one

that even the currently healthy person may find themselves in. I pray that the contemplation of their mortality may bring many to seek and find the truth.

In autumn 2019, I had the opportunity to participate in CMF's Sydenham 2 (SYD2) Conference in London for junior doctors. I arrived in London during a season of burnout in my career and personal life. At SYD2, I met brothers and sisters who loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and lived courageously for him in the face of suffering. They reminded me of my identity in Christ, the sweet fellowship with God's family that transcends borders, and the glory in eternity promised for those who stand firm in their faith. It was a taste of heaven to be able to worship and share life with them.

One moment that still brings tears of joy to my heart is when we all sang the Gettys' song together: *'There is a higher throne / Than all the world has known / Where faithful ones from every tongue / Will one day come.'* God used my brothers and sisters from every tongue to rekindle my flame for Jesus and his cause. We are not alone in living faithfully for Jesus. There is a group of Christian medical professionals in Canada that are striving to obey God,² as there are in many nations. As a Canadian doctor, I do not have the same challenges as my friends in developing countries, such as low resources which result in patients frequently dying because they can't afford healthcare. But in North America, we suffer from a spiritual poverty. We have forgotten the Lord who made us and has authority over our lives and also our deaths. Pray that God's children in my country will have wisdom to be 'Esthers in the palace', to be our Lord's mouthpieces, hands, and feet 'for such a time as this' (Esther 4:14). ■

REFS

1. Name has been changed
2. cmdacanada.org