Karl’s Story

Karl Jones (not his real name) was an 86 year old gentleman, of no fixed address, who was admitted to the general internal medicine service in December of 2014. This was after having logged over 60 visits to our emergency department. His admitting diagnosis was progressive dementia with a delusional disorder which had resulted in his inability to survive on the streets any longer. At the time of his admission, there were no acute medical conditions that required management. Certainly, Karl’s presentation was not morning report worthy. Yet in the six months that I had the pleasure of caring for him as I rotated on and off service, Karl’s story was one that would be very much remembered by myself and all those that cared for him.

Karl was of slim build with a big shock of white hair and a wide grin who prided himself in getting dressed and showered everyday, which usually involved a hospital gown and house coat along with red socks, standard hospital attire. Karl’s mental health issues could result in what was sometimes deemed ‘difficult’ behavior and at times he was deemed a ‘high flight risk’, two reasons that it was difficult to find a permanent residence for Karl. Although medications are usually administered to help with some of these issues, Karl’s dosing regimen was actually surprisingly low. The secret to this lay in the creativity and patience of the care team who took the time to understand Karl.

One morning as I was making my way to start my rounds on the wards, I noticed Karl sitting next to a sliding door with a clipboard and pencil. You see, he had been assigned the task of counting the number of individuals passing through our ward. As I went about my daily activities, I would walk past Karl, diligently recording the comings and goings on the unit. Towards the end of the day though, the pencil strokes would become progressively more erratic until finally Karl would have enough. He would then stand up exclaiming that ‘these people’ were asking too much of him, that the job ‘was too much’ and storm off to his room. Of course, the very next day, he would be right back at it.

Some days, Karl would go to the front desk, demanding to leave and asking to close his account/pay his bill as he had “things to do/ people to see”. The most appropriate response to this would be to bring him back to his room, explain that a room with a lovely view of the large shopping centre located next to our hospital had been arranged and that the dinner he had ordered was on its way. To which he would then respond by thanking us profusely for all of our efforts and indicate that he was more than happy to stay.

There was another female patient on our unit who had suffered a stroke, which left her unable to communicate verbally other than to chirp. As humans often do, a natural bond was formed between Karl and this patient and he became her companion on the floor, taking her for her daily walks around the unit, her arm entwined in his, chirping away to each other. Of course, Karl was realistic about this relationship and I once heard him say to her that she ‘could not follow him where he is from as it was no place for a lady but that while she was here, he would watch out for her.’

That patient inevitably left the unit, with Karl still left behind, his application having been turned down by many facilities. There remained one home though that hadn’t completely rejected his application. The team felt that a visit to the home would make his application more favourable. Of course, Karl was reluctant to go. The team spent a great deal of time going through our clothing donation pile. They were somehow able to find a lovely black suit, a white shirt and a red tie for this occasion. Once found, this was presented to Karl. Not one to miss an opportunity to dress up, Karl donned his new attire, looking every part the gentleman. Karl made a very favourable impressive that day. He had found himself a new home.

The time was soon approaching for Karl to leave St. Mike’s. Before this date though, there was his birthday to celebrate. The team got together and bought a cake. Music, balloons and streamers were also arranged. And on this day, the team presented Karl with a gift that they had all contributed to, a gold watch. Karl wore his suit and with a tear in his eye, he read a speech that he had prepared for this occasion. It reads as follows:

“St. Michael’s is a gracious place. A place where people understand the past and the present, which is now also the future… The hospital put my health back on track. They treated me with kindness and respect. I’m 86 years of age now and this is my blessing to St. Michael’s for the respect they have given me, the trust in me to stop drinking, a place to sleep and eat. I thank everyone for everything. The food was good, the nurses delicious!”

It has been over 2 years since Karl was with us. A picture of him still hangs in the charge nurses’ office and serves as a reminder to all of us that if you pay close enough attention, there is always a Karl to be found on our wards.