

Nails

By Katarina Doan-Thu Nguyen

An old adage claims that eyes are the windows into the soul. I disagree. Nails, insignificant as they seem, grant extraordinary insight into a patient's life. From cuticle to free edge, one can read months of another person's life. The horizontal canal of the Beau's line warns of severe illness and suggests deep turmoil for a patient and her loved ones in recent months. Thin, fragile nails may warn of osteopenia or neglect in the form of malnourishment. Brown discolorations may mark a breast cancer patient with a poor prognosis.

Despite all the bleak clues they may offer at first glance, nails foretell of a life being lived and story that is still unfolding. Yet it is sometimes too easy to look at the bleak signs and symptoms and forget everything that goes right in our patients' lives.

Consider Mrs. C, whose nails showed evidence of chronic kidney disease, displaying pronounced curvature of the free edge. The patient is an elderly African American woman with diabetes and morbid obesity, among many other ailments from anemia to diverticulosis. Her medication list alone was several pages long. She had nearly every complication associated with diabetes imaginable, save for retinopathy, and her weight was over 250lbs. She had been institutionalized at the nursing home for months and was recently victim to a gastrointestinal bleed.

Given all the medical difficulties Mrs. C faced and her prolonged nursing home stay, I was not expecting a happy and fulfilled patient. As I searched for Mrs. C and readied myself to ask relevant questions about her ailments, conduct a thorough review of systems, and check her mechanics through a quick physical exam, I braced myself for a forlorn woman whose medical concerns would easily fill our small notepad.

Mrs. C happily shattered my preconceived notions. She greeted and chatted up everyone she passed in the halls as though they were neighbors. She denied every problem I could think of aside from peripheral neuropathy. "Everything is good," she said with a smile. When asked if there was anything I could do for her, she requested only a nail clipping. Knowing that untrimmed toenails were a risk factor for injury and infection in diabetic patients, I gladly retrieved the supplies, happy that there was a useful task I could do for her. As I worked on her toenails, Mrs. C confessed that she was unable to reach them herself due to her obesity, but she was working on it. She was pleased with the progress she had made in her physical therapy and rejoiced at her good health compared to her pre-nursing home condition. Pride colored her voice as she told me about the 60lbs she lost due to exercise alone.

As I moved up to her fingernails, she had me bring out her special bag filled with polishes and cleansers. This was her hobby she shared with me. The distinctive patterns on her nails were done by her own hands despite her neuropathy and, although she worked with her

family members when they visited, these beauties were her own. As Mrs. C shared her technique for creating designs, her happiness and enthusiasm permeated the room.

I think too often we young people try to empathize with the elderly by putting ourselves in their shoes, only to become overwhelmed by their chronic diseases, their loss of function, and the difference between our lives. Some believe they would rather be dead than grow old. We fear age and sometimes fear the elderly who call to mind the sadness brought by our empathy and perhaps even remind us of our own impending old age. We forget that the elderly had time to grow into those shoes, to adapt and to learn to manage their burdens in a way that still allows them to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. In our well-intentioned arrogance, we miss the spirit that shouts, “I am whole, I am happy, I am alive.” Instead, we turn away, treating our elderly with pitying kindness and reluctant duty, or falling to our inclinations to abscond.

As future healthcare workers, this mindset has unsettling repercussions. Will our pity and sadness over our patients’ situations spread to them and drown their sense of wellbeing and satisfaction with life? And with depression being an unfavorable prognostic marker for many chronic conditions, how will our beliefs and attitudes shape our elderly patients’ health? Given the cheerful, affirming, and enthusiastic outlook of the geriatricians I have been privileged to observe, it would seem that geriatricians self-select for traits conducive to hope, satisfaction, and life.

Unfortunately, the number of prospective geriatricians declines as the number of elderly patients increases. It is likely that healthcare for the elderly will no longer be concentrated in geriatricians and will reach other practitioners. How then can we shift our mindsets towards a more positive view on the aged? For my part, I will work to look past my biases and see patients as they want to be seen—and I will remember Mrs. C.

Just as dull, roughened nails may speak of an innovative career as a chemist, or nail plate separation hint at the creative mind of a print-making artist, Mrs. C’s nails mark her as someone special. Her meticulous care for them reflects her desire to improve her health. Her careful painting and intricate designs mirror not only her artistic eye but also her continued determination to live her life with vigor. Her trust in allowing another to groom her nails and handle her craft is a mark of her trust in her providers in other aspects of her health, as well as the symbol of one who is willing to work with others as part of a community. Despite the extreme curvature of her toenails that proclaims kidney disease as one of her many comorbidities, I would have to say that Mrs. C’s life is worth living and that the story still unfolding will be a happy one—Mrs. C would certainly say so.

Katarina Doan-Thu Nguyen is a student at the University of Virginia School of Medicine and former volunteer for the Pregnancy Centers of Central Virginia. As she grows into her role as a clinician, she hopes to treat all of her patients with the care and admiration they richly deserve. “Nails” is a story of growing respect and understanding—in essence how the patient redefines the academic knowledge and preconceptions in the course of her care.
