

The Smile Gone

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Julie was a woman in her 40s who loved her job as a beautician. She had saved up enough money to open her own business along with her husband who had recently retired. She always took pride in her work and had clients from all over the town. A few months later she started noticing that her hand grip was weak and she could no longer hold onto her eye liner or mascara brush.

Worried that she might lose her clients, she decided to seek an opinion from a plastic surgeon who recommended a wrist brace for carpal tunnel syndrome. She wore it for a couple of months but the weakness continued to get worse. It was then that I saw her in my clinic for the hand weakness.

What struck me the most about Julie was her smile! Despite putting her through multiple tests including electric shocks, spinal taps, and needle pokes, she always had her angelic smile. Even on the day I gave her the diagnosis of ALS the smile never vanished. As months passed by, the torrid disease took over her body and the weakness worsened, but she always had her smile. Even when she was completely wheel chair bound and had to depend on her husband for everything she still had her smile on.

Our ALS association clinic is a tough place to be as a physician. You helplessly watch as the disease takes over the lives of our patients and their loved ones and yet Julie's smile was the bright spot in that dark place. Despite her breathing muscles becoming weak and being hooked onto the breathing machine she managed to keep her smile.

Throughout this time she developed multiple complications including pneumonia, blood clots, and heart problems and through it all she managed to keep her smile. During one of these hospital admissions Julie stopped smiling. The pearly white teeth that I was so accustomed to seeing were not visible any more.

It's always hard for physicians to let go of their patients especially after taking care of them for a long time and having gone through the disease with them. But I realized Julie's time had come. She no longer enjoyed her life and was in constant pain. Her biggest fear she told me was that she was going to die.

After a long discussion we decided to hospice care at home. A couple of days ago I received a call that Julie had peacefully passed away at her home. I am saddened by her loss but the memory of her smile will forever be with me. More importantly it will keep my spirits up while taking care of my other ALS patients.

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