

EDITOR'S PAGE

Here Today, . . .

William W. Parmley, MD, MACC

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*



He was tall, darkhaired, and handsome. In Los Angeles, he might have easily been mistaken for one of those older, rugged screen heroes of a western or adventure movie. He had an easy laugh and a zest for life. He was well known in hypertension circles, although less well known in cardiology. He had a successful academic career at USC and a unique way of teaching, using occasional outlandish or off-beat slides to make a point. He was confident, extroverted, and very attentive to his patients. He was in the prime of life; he seemed to have it all and was thoroughly enjoying it. His wife, Debbie, always traveled with him, and the two were a striking pair. He played tennis with enthusiasm and markedly enjoyed snorkeling and other ocean sports. In August, we were together at one of those memorable post-graduate courses put on by USC in Hawaii, as orchestrated by Dr. Phil Manning. We talked and laughed together and discussed our three mutual patients to bring each other up to date. The following morning he played tennis, and in the afternoon he went snorkeling. And he died. No it wasn't a shark attack like so many occurring in Florida and the Carolinas this year. No, he didn't get battered by the rocks and drown. At autopsy, he had severe coronary artery disease, a myocardial infarction, and a presumed fatal arrhythmia. His wife was unaware of any symptoms whatsoever that he might have experienced. He had a little hypertension (his specialty), but that was under control. Our common patients called me to talk about it—their shock was great, but no more than mine. And so, the following week the funeral was held in Los Angeles for Dr. Vincent DeQuattro, Professor of Medicine, University of Southern California. He was a great man, doctor, husband, and father. And to me he was a great friend.

Several thoughts have been running through my mind since this event, which are probably shared by most physicians. Death is no stranger to us in cardiology, and we feel the same pains and sorrow as others when a family member dies. However, there is something poignant and jolting when a healthy colleague dies suddenly. We identify directly with them. "There but for the grace of God go I." Suddenly the hassle of everyday things that we complain about doesn't seem so bad anymore. For a brief moment of clarity, we suddenly know those things that are important in our life and those that are not. In that moment of revelation, we suddenly remember our family. Vince can have no regrets in

that area. He was attentive to his family, and he and his wife traveled everywhere together. I mentally made a note to be a better husband, father, and grandfather, and to spend more time with that family I love. These feelings convince me that such relationships can continue beyond what we call death.

Sudden death of this kind is such a shock to family and friends. At the same time, however, a lingering, painful death from cancer would be no bargain by comparison. At the right time in our life, I'm sure we would all opt for sudden death. Although we are never in control of such happenings, it does prompt us to enjoy every day to the fullest. Hopefully, our experiences with dying patients also help us to make their final days as pleasant, and yes, even happy, where possible. It seems that a terminal cardiac problem focuses the mind very clearly on the value of the time remaining. I once took my then 95-year-old father to the bank to transact some business. Although there was only one other customer ahead of us in line, the transaction was taking an inordinate amount of time. Finally the teller looked over at us and apologized, saying that he would be with us shortly. I replied with a time-worn family saying, "That's OK, we have more time than money." Whereupon, my father turned directly to me, and with a piercing look, said, "Well, I don't." Despite his multiple medical problems, he made the most of his almost 100 years in mortality.

Well, as time has passed, the remembrance of that shock of hearing that my good friend, Vince DeQuattro had died suddenly, is fading. It probably will gradually disappear as I get caught up in those daily hassles that seem to occupy so much of our time and effort. But then, it will happen again to some other colleague, and once again I will have that clarity of mind as I fully understand what is important in my life and what is not. That perhaps is the message that we should remember from events like this. We shouldn't have to be jolted by the death of a friend to refocus our thoughts and actions on important matters, but rather, we should remain focused on those matters and let the trivia of life slide around us but never block our vision or our way.

Send correspondence to: William W. Parmley, MD, MACC, Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, 415 Judah St., San Francisco, California 94122.
