

CHAPTER 2

LIFESAVING SUCCESS STRATEGY: THE ART OF HUMAN CARE

BY HASSAN A. TETTEH, MD

The Art of Human Care is the ultimate lifesaving success strategy. I know this because the art of human care, embodied in purpose, personalization, and partnership, saved my life. At every stage of my medical career, I lost friends and colleagues to burnout, a departure from the profession of medicine, and, in extreme cases, suicide. Friends and colleagues that will never practice the art of human care because of a life cut short. Doctors who will never save a life because no one could help save their life. Twenty years ago, the term, “burnout” was not as well defined or studied as it is today. A 2019 Harvard study by Joel Goh and colleagues determined the problem of burnout was not just a problem impacting physician happiness. Burnout has severe implications for healthcare and costs an estimated \$4.6 billion, due to reduced hours, turn over, and the expenses associated with finding and replacing physicians that leave the profession.

Burnout among physicians is roughly double that of the general population and, yet, the root cause of the problem is

multifactorial—including emotional exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, detachment from work, and low personal accomplishment. Over the past ten years, I reflected deeply on this subject, thought about my friends and colleagues lost to burnout, depression, and suicide, and created a solution to help address the problem of burnout and engender a renewed passion for healthcare. The sum of my work is *The Art of Human Care*—a philosophy of purpose, personalization, and partnerships that aim to change the world positively. At the root of the art of human care is *art*, because, at my core, I am an artist, at least I would like to think so. I wanted to be an artist when I grew up.

As a child, I loved art. I grew up in the small village town of Brooklyn, New York, and created mosaics of graffiti art that colored the five boroughs of New York, and appeared vividly on trains. Acceptance to the prestigious Art and Design High School in New York City—was a testament to my early artistic talent and the institution's high regard for my cherished art portfolio. My father, however, would not let me enroll. "You will never make money as an artist," he said. He insisted, instead, that I attend Brooklyn Technical High School, a specialized science and engineering school requiring an entrance exam for admission. In retrospect, perhaps my father helped me make the right decision. Ultimately, I became a doctor and surgeon. However, I still love art, and *The Art of Human Care* is now my life's work.

THE GENESIS OF THE ART OF HUMAN CARE

In surgery, we say the natural course of one's disease is abruptly altered by the application of the cold hard steel of our scalpel. We induce trauma to change one's life, ideally for the better. Ultimately, it was as an undergrad, where a near-death experience and traumatic tragedy would set in motion a series of events destined to alter the course of my life. As a pre-med in college, I interviewed at Johns Hopkins Medical School under an early decision program. I was beyond excited. After my interview, I

knew I was destined to become a doctor. I returned to my small college in upstate Plattsburgh, New York, to await the official news of my acceptance. Over the ensuing days, I became very ill with fever, chills, and the worst headache and neck pain of my life. I visited our college infirmary, was diagnosed (incorrectly) with gastroenteritis, prescribed penicillin tablets, and instructed to stay in bed and drink plenty of fluids. On a Friday night, alone in my room, and unable to call for help, two fraternity brothers, worried about me, entered my dorm room.

When they found me, I was lethargic and barely responsive. My friends rushed me to the Emergency Room at our local hospital. I remember sternal rubs, being told to hold still because a needle was going into my back and recall bright lights and masked people hovering over me. The doctor informed me I had a severe infection and could die. I was a patient. Many people experience being patients in their life, but not really. You are indeed a patient when you are stripped of your clothes, wear the hospital issued gown in humiliation, can no longer do things for yourself, and don't know what is going on. That happened to me. I did not understand what was happening to me. I was uncertain, anxious, scared, and thought I was going to die.

Fortunately, my healing mind took over and did what medicine alone could not have done. I had a positive outlook on my future, engendered by my recent interview for medical school, and a spirited soul that believed I was destined to become a healer. After all, I interviewed at Johns Hopkins and was determined not to let anything take me out. The process helped me to appreciate the power of thought, the mind, and how a positive, optimistic vision of one's future purpose could impact your health. It was the *ultimate* live-saving strategy.

FINDING PURPOSE

The truth about a near-death experience is that you are presented with two realities. First is the reality that you have just been

given a second chance at life. Second is to appreciate and find the answer to a simple question with great urgency: why am I still alive? Contracting a lethal bacterial meningitis infection as a college junior, and delay in my diagnosis, delivered an otherwise fit, healthy, and an invincible young man to the intensive care unit with a tube in every orifice of my body. Only after emerging from my ordeal, did I learn the experts expected me to die. The odds were against me. Yet, I didn't die—I *exceeded* expectations. Since that fateful time in undergrad, the natural course of my life was abruptly altered. I've spent my life reconciling two realities. I was given a second chance at life, and there must be a reason why. Ultimately, I would learn Johns Hopkins would not accept me to medical school as I had hoped.

Although many years have passed since my near-death ordeal, I still remember the lessons learned about human care that being a patient taught me. My experience taught me about *empathy*, and what it feels like to be a patient. The average physician may have 80,000-100,000 patient encounters over a typical career. Thus, there are potentially 100,000 similar stories that patients like mine could share of the impact their healthcare encounter had on their life. Not all battles will be as involved as mine. However, in my career, I realize the work we do in healthcare engenders an incredible power and a gift to impact and affect the lives of others in a significant way and consequently change the world.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

I am a healer. On numerous occasions in life, including after learning the disappointing news from Johns Hopkins, I tried to run away from this fact. I also reflected with some regret on my abandoned aspiration to be an artist. In the process, an epiphany emerged. The art of healing through surgery is my singular purpose, and the reason I believe I'm here. To be a healer is the reason I survived death. I mean that in a physical, spiritual, and emotional way. My work in heart and lung transplantation

exposes me repeatedly in a visceral way to the fragility of life and the physical reality of death. The reward and miracle of life that transplant brings to a desperately-ill recipient restores my optimism in the ethereal with every case. My highest satisfaction and joy come from helping others – through surgery, through inspiring, and through sharing a challenge or triumph I've overcome in my personal life – that aligns with another individual's story to offer hope for the possible.

The Art of Human Care is my prescription for the problem of sick-care focus, over health and wellness and the remedy for our inherent dissatisfaction with healthcare. Many people are not really feeling better when they engage with our healthcare system, and few discover they have a purpose. However, with an identified purpose, an individual can come alive and feel invigorated even with a terminal illness. I have seen it. I've seen people go from knocking on death's door to turn their life around and live a life full of passion and vigor with a purpose. Achieving health is our real goal, and it does not have to cost a lot. One does not have to cure to heal. Many people get their sick care at the hospital. However, there is seldom healing of the whole body and the individual in a hospital. True healing and subjective well-being come from someplace else. Typically, health and well-being come from a patient's support system of friends, family, community, church, or other places, not a healthcare system.

POWER IN PARTNERSHIPS

To achieve health through human care, I would argue, a necessary connection is needed beyond the hospital. We all need a purpose. With a purpose comes renewed life. For a patient, purpose transcends anything we, as providers, can give them in the hospital. A study of the ancient models of healing reveals healers *really* healed. Healers studied the whole body and appreciated the totality of an individual's relationships, existence, and experiences. The healers would note what was

contributing to a patient's ill health, and observe when the body was out of balance. Today, despite our sophisticated diagnostics, our assessment of a patient's purpose is performed only in a cursory way. In this context, how much information is obtained in our traditional settings? How much will most patients reveal in a hurried office visit, the fleeting moment during hospital inpatient rounds, or in the bustling pace of an emergency room? To appreciate a patient's challenges in a meaningful way, let alone understand the patient's purpose, and address their needs, a different approach is needed. A *partnership* must be formed. This type of care rarely happens in our current settings. Yet, critical insight into a patient's purpose, and delivery of personalized human care, absolutely impact a person's health.

The Art of Human Care aims to change the world. Like the surgical example of cold hard steel altering the natural course of one's disease and problems, the art of human care alters the natural course of healthcare as we know it today. To inspire all those that care for humans, I thought critically about what it means to heal and present through the art of human care, a creative vision of how to change the world through healing. We need to promote health through purpose, personalization, and partnership. For with health, wisdom reveals itself, art becomes manifest, we have the strength to fight life's challenges, our wealth becomes useful, we may apply our intelligence and positively change the world.

The practice of human care represents the totality of my career in medicine. Human care combines the healing power of art, science, and inspiration delivered to all those that care for humans to create an evolving work. The singular aim of the art of human care is to heal individuals, promote health, and positively change the world. My experience as a surgeon, and aspiring artist confirms art is not merely an escape from work; instead, art is necessary to provide energy and inspiration to do *the work of healing* even better. Thus, art helps make the work of healing better. I've observed the positive effect on patients

during healing arts exhibits. I suspect it is also the reason why art is ubiquitous on hospital walls, a sculpture is displayed, and music often fills the air in our places of healing and health. Art heals and indeed is a gift for the heart. Like my daughter the artist admonishes, without 'art' the heart is *just* "eh."



About Dr. Hassan A. Tetteh

Dr. Hassan A. Tetteh is a US Navy Captain and Associate Professor of Surgery at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and adjunct faculty at Howard University College of Medicine. He was a Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Fellow from 2012-13, assigned to the US Congress, Congressional Budget Office, (CBO). Currently, Dr. Tetteh is a Thoracic Surgeon for MedStar Health and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. He leads a Specialized Thoracic Adapted Recovery (STAR) Team, in Washington, DC, and his research in thoracic transplantation aims to expand heart and lung recovery and save lives.

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Hassan A. Tetteh received his BS from State University of New York (SUNY) at Plattsburgh, his MD from SUNY Downstate Medical Center, his MPA from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, his MBA from Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School, and his MS in National Security Strategy with a concentration in Artificial Intelligence from the National War College. He completed his thoracic surgery fellowship at the University of Minnesota and advanced cardiac surgery fellowship at Harvard Medical School's Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

Dr. Hassan A. Tetteh is founder and principal of Tetteh Consulting Group, a best-selling author of four books including *Gifts of the Heart*, *Star Patrol*, *The Art of Human Care*, and *Seven Pillars of Life*. He is board certified in thoracic surgery, general surgery, clinical informatics, and healthcare management, and is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives.

Dr. Tetteh received the Alley Sheridan Award by the Thoracic Surgery Foundation for Research and Education, was named a TEDMED Front Line Scholar, and is a TEDx speaker. He's an alumnus of the Harvard Medical School Writers' Workshop and Yale Writers' Conference, and lives near Washington, D.C. with his wife, son, and daughter.