



## Where Have Our Relationships Gone?

By Seth Bilazarian on theheart.org on Medscape at the ACC meeting in San Diego

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**Editor's Note:** *At the opening session of the 2015 American College of Cardiology (ACC) Scientific Sessions in March, the [Simon Dack lecture](#) by Dr Abraham Verghese was titled "I Carry Your Heart" after an ee cummings poem. In addressing cardiologists, the best-selling author and physician noted that the words of the poem define what "heart" means outside of a meeting like this.*

The keynote lecture at the ACC was by Dr. Abraham Verghese, an infectious disease specialist, who is the vice chairman of medicine at Stanford Medical School, where Dr. Robert Harrington, of Medscape, is the chairman. Dr. Verghese spoke about the relationship of patients to physicians and how much has been lost in the medical treatment of patients.

Dr. Verghese highlighted the sacred nature of our relationship with patients. He made several quotes that have become part of the discussion in and around the ACC. He says that patients' feelings for their physician are like the feeling of love, that they crave the relationship more than their numbers, and that our relationship with our patients starts with trust. It is the default position. Those weren't his words, but that is what I took from them.

He said that patients will tell us things that they wouldn't tell some other person who is presumed to be trusted, such as a rabbi or a priest. They won't tell other people things that they tell us, and they also expect us—they allow us and expect us—to touch them, which is something that is very unusual in our society.

By their very nature, our uniforms, our white coats, and the disposition of the patient and their disposition towards us are incredible things that we, in large part, have lost for a variety of reasons.

Dr. Verghese highlighted the fact that currently medical students spend about 40% of their time on the computer when they are on the clinical wards. For an emergency department physician to admit a patient, it takes 140 clicks of the computer, and the electronic health record is a problem.

He implied that it has a significant negative impact on our relationship with patients. It has been an impediment to that.

### The Burdens of Bureaucracy

As I left this talk, my reaction was that everything he said was true, and it certainly made me quite sad that this has all happened. I feel that fixing this is a significant challenge because in no way did Dr. Verghese suggest that we should not continue to commit to technical expertise, for those of us who do things that require technical expertise. Reading echocardiograms, performing cardiac catheterizations, and conducting stress tests require technical expertise.

We need to continually approve our fund of knowledge. I am sure that Dr Verghese wouldn't disagree. In our practice, the meaningful use stage 2 requirements require additional checking to prove that I am doing certain things, such as documenting that I talked to patients about their diet or smoking or updating the family history. The burdens of bureaucracy take away from the time that I spend with patients.

I think about the time that I have with patients as being very finite, and anything that is added to that requires me to lose valuable time that I could use to build a relationship.