

## A Warmer Winter

A few years ago, while working on a project with our EM residents at Triune Mercy Center, I joined the staff for their early morning meeting. Triune works with people experiencing homelessness to provide a variety of services, a few of which are an address to receive mail, access to computers with an internet connection, legal assistance, and walk-in medical care. Though Triune does not provide overnight shelter, their staff welcomes people early in the morning with a cup of coffee and a place to warm up. As the day gets started, everyone joins hands to form a large circle. On this morning, the man standing beside me wearing a thin jacket had just come in from sleeping outside. As we clasped hands, I was shocked by how cold his was.

In the emergency department, we regularly care for unhoused patients, but by the time they reach us, they've had time to warm up in the back of an ambulance or in our lobby. Many of us wear gloves when we examine all our patients. We quickly run our fingertips across their bodies in search of a tender abdomen, a diminished pulse, or pitting edema. Standing there in disbelief of this man's frigid hand, I realized how often I touch but how rarely I feel my patients. The meeting leader recited a short prayer, and I willed my body to transfer my heat into that hand until it was time to let go.

There are so many encounters with people and patients that I forget. Years of night shifts and circadian disruption have kept my brain from solidifying most events on shift into memories. But the feeling of that cold hand has stayed with me. I think about it every time I click the discharge button, sending someone back to a home without heat or out into the rain. And I think about it on my way home as I turn on the seat heater in my car, sometimes driving past people huddled on a sidewalk in the middle of the night. How lucky I am to be warm.

As winter approaches once again, we are bringing back our warmth cabinet. We will collect new socks, gloves, winter hats, rain ponchos, and hand warmers. If you'd like to donate, please drop the items into the large collection container. We will sort everything and place it into labeled bins on the shelves for easy access. If you have a patient in need, please give generously from those bins.

We can't solve our patients' problems with a hat or a pair of wool socks. But we can provide just a little bit of comfort. We can say, I feel you. I care about you.

*I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.*

*—A Modern Hippocratic Oath, Dr. Louis Lasagna, 1964*