

Doctor Prizes
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Talking to each other in the back room about our clinic days, we call them “Doctor Prizes.” They are the gifts our patients bring us to say, “Thank you.” To say, “I feel seen, and heard, and cared for.” To say, “I trust you.” Most are of nominal cash value (and we cannot keep the ones that are anything but), but they mean so much to me.

It is satisfying to help someone achieve better health. Those moments are enough. The doctor prizes are the unexpected, the cherry on top. It doesn’t take much to warm my heart, to inoculate me against the tougher parts of my work week.

I have received homemade cookies, Concord grape jam, homegrown asparagus, crocheted blankets and sweaters for my baby, hand-beaded jewelry in my favorite colors, a carving of my boxer dog from scrap wood, greeting cards of Wisconsin scenes painted by a patient. I have received innumerable Thank You notes. One patient of mine, a fabric artist, decided that health care workers needed tangible awards for our extraordinary efforts in the pandemic. She embroidered a dazzling plate-sized medal to hang on my wall. I even had a patient bring me an apple from his family’s farm. An apple. For a doctor he did not want to keep away. It was funny, and delicious. It doesn’t take much to sweeten my day.

Sometimes the prizes are intangible. These come in the form of updates on life events, invitations to ceremonies, proffered smartphone photos of a new grandbaby. Though MyChart warns patients with dire language not to upload non-medical photos, one patient wrote, “I don’t care! Here’s my grandson, the most beautiful baby in the world!” Another patient, finding that she would be moving out of state, made an appointment to tidy up her medical chart before departing. At the end of our visit, she told me that she would miss my clinic team, she had never felt so safe in a medical office. She said she had a gift for me, and over telemedicine sang to me – “Jesus Loves Me.” It doesn’t take much to lighten my spirit.

I keep them all. I have a folder in my filing cabinet labeled “Happy Things,” and a crowded shelf in my office. I go there when the days are tough. It doesn’t take much to get me through. My heart is full.