“Initially, cancer was my overriding concern,” Dr. Smith said, “but the diagnosis is still uncertain. At this point, my assumption is that this is an atypical radiological presentation of hepatic steatosis. I apologized to her about the incorrect diagnosis. It initially seemed almost certain that this was metastatic cancer, but my working diagnosis was wrong.” Dr. Smith said. The patient replied that no apology was needed.

Why did Dr. Smith apologize? A physician apology to a patient has become a central tenet of risk management, an important component of how to deal with a medical error that has harmed a patient. Here, there was no error.

Dr. Smith reflected on each step he took in this case. “Should I have waited to order the CT scan?” Dr. Smith asked himself. Yet in the end, he probably would not have done things differently. Dr. Smith had communicated his clinical thinking to the patient throughout the process, explaining the rationale for each blood test and scan, as well as the liver biopsies and referrals to other specialists. There were no physical damages related to the incorrect diagnosis and no concern about a lawsuit.

But Dr. Smith recognized the emotional fallout of telling a person that she likely had metastatic cancer. By apologizing, he demonstrated genuine empathy, putting himself in the patient’s place as she spent months pondering that she might soon die.

In this setting, an apology strengthens the bond between doctor and patient. Part of mindful medicine is to be aware of the emotional consequences of your thinking.

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SUBMIT YOUR IDEAS FOR MINDFUL MEDICINE

Do you have a case where a medical diagnosis required you to dig beyond the obvious? It’s easy to submit a case. Send the diagnosis and a two-sentence summary to acphospitalist@acponline.org for consideration.