

The value of life

Alexandra Ferre, MD, *Cleveland, Ohio*

What is the price of human life? At its core, the question is offensive. The value of a human life is immeasurable, vast, and unquantifiable. This question never darkens the door of the trauma bay, for in trauma, the team has one purpose, one unifying goal: preserve life.

My life is worth approximately 10 thousand US dollars plus my grandmother's earrings and my uncle's gold wedding band. That is what I learned on Friday, November 8, 2013, at the young age of 22. Early that morning, after working a 24-hour shift as a physician in Caracas, Venezuela, I was followed home by two men on motorcycles. They drug me from my car at gunpoint and tied me up with my father's silk ties while they robbed my family's house before unceremoniously stuffing me blindfolded in the trunk of a car.

During the ensuing drive, I listened to my captors vigorously talking in my native language pare down experiences, years of education, family ties, and physical attributes in an effort to determine a sum of my worth. They contemplated whether as a small young woman I would be worth more to my family or on the thriving Venezuelan human trafficking market. I frantically slammed my face against the coarse trunk carpet, splitting open my right eyebrow and ripping out chunk of my hair, in an ineffectual attempt to decrease my physical value. The men delivered me to an abandoned building where their boss irate with my swollen and bloody face—apparently the product was less pristine than described. I spent the night curled up in a tight, anxious ball in the corner of an empty room, hoping my family could scrape together enough money to free me, dreading the possibility that despite my marred face I would be sold to a local drug dealer.

After they traded my life for US \$10,000 cash and my family's jewelry, I was left blindfolded on the side of a busy highway in only my hospital scrub top, underwear, and socks.

My disheveled state was such a common sight in Venezuela that no drivers even paused on their morning commute. I walked miles to the nearest gas station, called my family, and considered myself lucky that I was worth such a reasonable sum.

My current life here in the United States bears few resemblances to my previous life in Venezuela. While I used to wait in line for the two tubes of toothpaste I was allotted per month, now I pick from four different colors of bell peppers at the grocery store—eight different options I suppose if you count the organic peppers. I am finally able to drive with my windows down without fear of robbery or highway bombs, and I park my car in the hospital parking lot without concern that my tires will be stolen. No matter how far geographically I distance myself from Venezuela and the dark trunk of that car, I will always remember the moment with warm blood stinging my eyes that I learned what my life was worth.

Regardless of where you are in the world, life has value. This value is immeasurable in dollars or bolivares or euros or grams of gold. The language of trauma is the same everywhere, and I chose this calling because, in trauma, it is accepted without a question that human life is beyond valuation. In every trauma patient I see, I get a glimpse of what my life could have been if I had stayed in Venezuela. I no longer have to fashion pleuravacs from empty Gatorade bottles; however, I carry that resourcefulness with me and do my best to connect my patients with the resources they need after trauma so that they can break the cycle of trauma and violence. Caring for these patients is personal for me and will spend my life giving them the best chance possible to survive, recover, and thrive.

DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Submitted: February 10, 2021, Accepted: February 24, 2021, Published online: March 9, 2021.

From the Department of General Surgery Cleveland, Ohio, Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Address for reprints: Alexandra Ferre, MD, Department of General Surgery, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, 9500 Euclid Ave Cleveland, OH 44195; email: Ferrea2@ccf.org; ferreaalexandra@gmail.com.

DOI: 10.1097/TA.0000000000003154

J Trauma Acute Care Surg
Volume 91, Number 1