



'Progress Note'

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

I HAVE WRITTEN THOUSANDS OF UPDATES ON MY PATIENTS' conditions through my multi-decade career. Tradition and habit have me call these updates "progress notes." Yet, are they really that?

For certain conditions whose natural history allows for a potential resolution or at least improvement, the term is certainly apt. Acute conditions such as infections or allergic reactions, or controllable conditions such as hypertension and diabetes, can certainly be referred to as "making progress." The notes are also a place where I wrestle with differential diagnoses, tests to order or consider, and add input to my analyses from a consultant or reference source. In this way, they document progress in clinical understanding.

Some conditions are less amenable to medical intervention or have reached a stage in their own natural history when the most we can hope for is a controlled decline. Think advanced dementia, end-stage cancer, or severe inoperable arthritis. These are less easily described in a context of progress. Ironically these notes often outline the progress of the disease rather than the patient.

Even in these situations, however, there is something hopeful and useful about the label. A patient's progress may be measured against a theoretical baseline of his status without intervention. There may still be pain, dysfunction, or pathology but it may not be as severe or debilitating as it would have been without medical care.

In the end, the progress note can be both an accurate account of clinical reality and a linguistic facade masking the uncomfortable truth of medicine's limitations. When confronted with futility, we may be best served by finding ways to orient our care to the realistic goals of comfort and acceptance toward which we can truly guide our patients' progress. +



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Progress Note

Another baffling history
Puzzling lab, bizarre sore throat
Just how to probe the mystery
I wrestle in the progress note

I do my darndest not to rush
To button up my thoughts and coat
And wait till hubbub calms to hush
To finalize the progress note

I make a breakthrough diagnosis
Do I grieve or do I gloat?
It all depends on the prognosis
Explained within my progress note

Capturing a patient's story
Near-verbatim, quote-unquote
Include a useful allegory
To amplify the progress note

Wholesome health, a castle's keep
Around the structure runs a moat
Across its span threats swim or leap
They're listed in my progress note

Nature's both a queen and bitch
Last to bat and first to vote
Supportive up until her switch
Lamented in my progress note

So often there's no "progress" made
And yet this vessel stays afloat
Perhaps I've helped to ease the fade
I hope so in my progress note. +