

Dr. Ronald Wyatt, an internist in Madison, Ala., entered an exam room to meet a new patient and his wife several years ago. When he walked in, the woman immediately pulled a framed photo from a large grocery bag.

It was the couple's daughter, and Wyatt recognized her as his patient — one who had died two years earlier.

"I really can't speak with you about this," Wyatt recalled saying, his anxiety rising.

The father blocked the door, instructing the doctor: "You are not leaving this room."

There were no alarms to set off, so Wyatt relented. Eventually, he opened his computer and showed, through patient records, how hard his team had worked to prevent their daughter's death; he said he, too, had loved her. The father started weeping, then left peacefully. But it could have gone another way.

"Either one of them could've pulled a gun and shot me," Wyatt said. "I had no way out of that room."

It was a unique experience in Wyatt's career. But at its essence, it was also a moment — filled with tension and seemingly ripe to explode in violence — that is disturbingly common in American clinics and hospitals. Those moments frequently lead to physical assaults when patients or family members suspect a medical error has taken place...