

Insight into a *hospital stay*

Trying one's patients

By Shel Miller, Ph.D.

BY MIDNIGHT SATURDAY, after 30 hours of abdominal pain and many sleepless nights, I had to decide. Fortunately, two family members and my on-call physician were there to convince me to go to the Emergency Room (ER).

I'd fantasized that the ward would be overrun with all sorts of weekend demands, from some folks on their last legs, a shooting victim perhaps, and a crash victim or two. I had never been to this particular Boston hospital though I knew of its high reputation. I trusted my doctors and the ER experience was quite impressive; the wait not too long; the intake painlessly done by a with-it and kind person; the wild night patient traffic already diminishing. So I was assessed quickly and with efficiency, as was my wife, who unbeknownst to me, became feint herself as she was dealing with an allergic reaction to the red pepper in her evening meal. It would be hours before I would find out why she hadn't come to check on me.

When I co-directed the Humanistic Health Care Project, at Kenmore's Harvard Community Health Plan in 1983, I was keenly aware of the impact of the kind or not so kind words that all levels of staff had on the experience of the vulnerable patient. Now it was my turn to be the patient for an extended period. I hoped for humanistic health care. Would I trust that the staff would be both sincere and competent? I think that in

moments of neediness especially, we become automatic instant assessors of each face we meet each word we hear. Is this someone that really knows what they are doing? Is he/she being authentically nice to me?

It would be a sleeplessly eye-opening week. They indicated they would admit me around 6 a.m., after which I waited several hours for a bed upstairs. Efficiency, it turned out, was not the strong suit of this institution. At August's end the interns were being let loose by their residents and enjoying the chance to find their own way. The vascular resident in the ER shepherded me through the process very well until the physician in charge of the ER finally told me that my wife had also been admitted. Earlier, one nurse told me that she was going to get my wife but never came back. Could I now trust her or her colleagues?

Sincere Manner

THE GI TEAM later showed up regularly with great interest in my bowel movements. A kindly, young intern seemed to be coordinating the performance. His manner was sincere, yet he later made some naïve (i.e. incompetent) comments about my long-term medical condition. Thankfully, my attending physician—my primary care doc of several years—got my morphine soaked mind back on track. I trusted him implicitly!

Despite my need to pull together what was happening with the different and possibly related functions of my organs, cross-departmental conferencing was probably not necessary. They were each busy with the search for a rational cause of my problem and what needed to be done. Hopefully they were not as tired, light-headed and overwhelmed as I.

I remember one particularly eager medical student who asked an important, basic question. I liked the fact that he was an earnest, respectful learner who was eager to listen. My roommate also had a lot of questions for his medical team. He asked the same ones repeatedly on what seemed like an hourly basis to a constant parade of care and after care professionals for the full four days of my stay. Sadly, he was still feeling trapped there without an acceptable rehabilitation program in the offing. I left and wished him well. I understood the

challenge, but the providers generally acted as if I did not exist three feet away as they spoke loudly about his conditions and possibilities. Maybe a sign on each side of the curtain in a double room would help: "patient exists on other side even though you can't see him."

Praise for physician

I, on the other hand, had been blessed by a team of caretakers who were sensitive to the lack of privacy. My guess is that my attending doctor was their influential role model. He was there, however briefly, for me in every way, every day, the quiet mensch and brilliant observer, explainer and mentor whom I had come to know over the last few years. All the while my roommate's TV was stuck on CNN with early repetitive reports of the hurricane in the Gulf. It would take until the day of my release before I would understand the compelling nature of this story. Little did I know the insignificance of my minor woes in contrast to the dissolution of towns along that Gulf coast.

Oh, if you were wondering about that detail with the vascular guy in the ER that upset me, I had already been hooked up to two IVs, had drunk a ton of barium, had been put through a CT scan and had yet to get a wink of sleep. In fact, I had already accepted my third consecutive sleepless night. At the time, I had been admitted to the ER and would now be admitted upstairs waiting for a bed. Then I was confronted by the doc who had been so helpful, announcing, "I'm going to put a catheter in your bladder." After my third successive demanding, "Why?" I convinced him that I could pee into a container and they could collect my urine. If I also had the burden of a catheter, how different those four days would have been as I also had been tethered by IV lines on both of my arms. While he had lost a bit of the competency credits he had banked, he did one great thing for me before the Sunday dawn. He showed up, again, to my bedside.

Only then, when the doc came to see me, did the new shift nurse finally come right over to hook the medicine to my lines. I knew I needed the drip from these bags that were hanging there on my pole for quite some time. And I wanted them hooked up! She was the only nurse I would encounter that in my weakened state, struck me as a tad more attuned to pleasing the docs than the patient. An hour before, she had replaced the sweet, sincere angel who had worked with me all night. She looked like a recurring character from MAD TV. Nothing worse than an ER admission for a type A personality! It is even harder to be patient when you are sleepless, in pain, and uncertain.

Practicing on me

An endoscopy was in the works. I had turned down the offer of one a year before in less worrisome circumstances. I have already breezed through two colonoscopies, but I knew that the doctors who would do them were at the top of their GI game in the Boston area. Now I knew I would have a Fellow, supervised by a very young looking physician in charge of his team. My attending joked, "Well, they have to practice on someone." I settled down, accepting his attempt at humor. The Fellow and other GI doc and nurse were in fact, wonderful and competent. And of course I transferred to them the halo and equanimity of my attending doctor. I trust him completely. I question him a lot and I have had years to assess his responsiveness. Lesson: select and connect with your primary care doc when you are relatively well, not when you are so compromised that you don't have the time to build trust.

Room sanitation

I wish I could have trusted the sanitation of my hospital room. It looked so old and the floor so filthy. While I waited to sign the discharge papers, I had nothing better to do than watch what was going on around me. The cleaning lady mopped out the toilet and dumped the

yucky excess into the shower drain I had used the day before and will likely not use ever again in a hospital. From the bathroom, she completed her round of the bedroom. She wore latex gloves used to touch items and waste. She picked up my phone, which she then lay down on my pillow. I then used it to call my wife to apprise her of my continuing delay. Then I figured I'd better wash my hands and my phone. Yup, there's no place like home. I pray she used some sort of disinfecting agent on everything.

Discharge blues

Getting from hospital to home was such a hassle! I was told I would be discharged at 10:30 a.m. but delayed my actual leaving until about 4 p.m. My wife was kept waiting to leave work and get me home to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary that very day. My nurse knew that and like all the nurses on the floor, she was wonderful, kind, responsive, and competent. But her hands were tied as she waited for one of the scripts that the intern forgot to write before he left. Another very busy intern was covering for him. Right before I left, I received a visit — right at the wrong moment — from the patient care coordinator asking how my discharge was going. Her explanation for the absurd delay was very professional. She explained that the particular covering doctor had been slammed with intakes, which then to my ears became, "BLAH, BLAH, BLAH." I thought I would add something else to my whine. After all, she was so solicitous and such a good listener.

Here's what I conveyed. I had been told to drink barium for a follow-up CT scan and to finish by a certain in time to be taken downstairs. I was thrilled when the CT transport finally showed up to wheel me down, two hours late. What I did not at that point count on was another 10-15 minute wait for an elevator. I learned that the four elevators in that building were as overwhelmed, as is the up and down health care system in this country. Not enough elevators for the numbers of patient trips or visitors! I asked a couple of transport folks if feedback about that kind of issue was ever sought out, and they looked at me as if I was crazy.

When I finally got to the CT scan department, a gentleman wheeled me into the very small waiting area. I was facing the wall and the scanner was off to the right behind double-glassed doors. I turned to the right and started to read the writing on the huge machine, but curiosity killed the cat. Suddenly a tall thin man rushed over to me and said, "I'm pushing you in." For a moment I was gratified that he was finally taking me in. Then he curtly said, "You don't need to be looking in there!" and walked away. He had simply pushed me a couple of inches further into the waiting area so that, now, if I looked right I would see only waiting room wall. I plan to call this person and suggest how he might have conveyed to me his proper concern for other customer's privacy in a more dignified manner.

I should report that my wife was fine by the next morning. ran right home to get items for my hospital stay and brought them right back despite her losing a full night's sleep. She worked a full eek and visited me every night and one crucial morning. She did the troubleshooting by phone when I could not summon energy to expedite my discharge. In short she was my hero: the most competent and sincere person in my life. No wonder the statistics show that married men live longer than unhappy single men. And kudos to my 23-year old son as well who checked on me via phone and daily visits. It's nice to have two heroes who you can trust completely. They keep their promises, with the ultimate of caring manner. They would have been wonderful physicians.

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