

May 5, 2014 TODAY'S HEALTH FOR THE EMPOWERED WOMAN

“INTO THE GRINDER”

A slight deviation in my usual format :based upon a recent personal experience , so that I might share some insights about the medical profession from a different perspective—ME AS THE PATIENT. I have been a physician for forty years and prided myself for the compassion that I expressed to my patients: explaining the rigors of labor and the birth process; outlining the reasons for surgery and potential complications; discussing the bad news of a cancer diagnosis and the difficult treatment thereof; dealing with anxious and sometimes hostile family members, etc. While I thought I understood their fears, in truth, I had never been a patient myself except for some minor surgeries. That all changed this week. Just before retirement in October we planned an April trip to South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe to experience these countries, the animals and the famous Victoria Falls. A marvelous trip but a nonstop 17 hour flight from Johannesburg to New York. The very next day I experienced crushing chest pain and my physician training told me that this could not be a good thing. I tried to rationalize that fatigue and riding an elephant were the cause but when I experienced shortness of breath I knew that I needed help. Took two aspirin as everyone should do if suspecting a heart attack and called a close medical school friend who practices internal medicine. At that instant I felt that I had walked into a grinder and for the first time was on the inside looking out. After a physical exam, an EKG, two CT scans, lab work and an echocardiogram it was determined that I had pericarditis—a viral infection of the sac that surrounds the heart and easily treated by over the counter anti-inflammatory drugs. Maybe I am a pessimist but the realist in me had me thinking, as each of these tests was being done, that the next step would be a trip to the operating room for a bypass or worse. I thought that the much anticipated retirement would be truncated, I would not see my new grandson be born and not dance at my granddaughters' weddings. Fortunately none of that came to pass. The point here is that patients have these fears every day and most likely don't understand the tests that are being done nor the ramifications if one or any of them is positive. To the great credit of the medical profession, every physician, desk clerk, technician and nurse showed extreme professionalism and compassion and despite my medical training explained everything in detail despite this all happening late on Friday. I have now stepped out of the “grinder” and feel well. More than ever I am happy that I made the decision to make medicine my career. Our profession does good work despite the pressures from government , insurance companies and lawyers. We must never take lightly the fear patients have of overwhelmingly complex and intricate diagnostic machinery and of the potential life changes that a bad diagnosis will have. Compassion and calming explanations administered with a gentle hand will enable the patient and the provider to reach a relationship that despite the outcome will lend dignity to the process. The Golden Rule if you please and the foundation for the Hippocratic Oath.