Thursday Memo – December 15, 2016

Doing Good Feels Good – by Hugh Silk

What things that we do in family medicine will result in a patient being instantly satisfied?

An emergency room doc will reduce a shoulder; an obstetrician will deliver a baby; and a surgeon will remove an infected appendix. Soon after the event, the patient will say: thank you so much doctor.

So often I get someone to quit smoking after 2 years of trying and then they start up again and then stop again. Maybe a couple years later they say - hey I feel a little better so thanks for helping me quit. But never do I hear 20 years later - thanks for preventing my lung cancer and heart attack by getting me to quit 20 years ago...

Now to be fair - some of us in family medicine do reduce shoulders and deliver babies. But it is usually not a daily event. Now cleaning out an ear that is fully plugged with cerumen and allowing someone to hear again OR clipping some gnarly thickened toe nails - that gets me a huge "thanks doc!"

Over the past two weeks however I have had a chance to get a lot of "thank yous" and big smiles. I have felt gratitude that has given me a lift. Now I never became a family doctor to get the acute thank yous. I knew what I was getting into. I knew the thank yous would be implied over a lifetime of struggling for wellness alongside my patients. And I am okay with that. However, it is nice to get a little gratitude every once in a while. I have never been one who is comfortable with receiving gifts from patients but a smile goes a long way to keeping me energized.
So - I have been handing out the department holiday gift bags to patients in need. I delivered 12 to a women's recovery home that is intended for women with children to rehab from drug use. (I provide primary care to the women there.) Every women was sincerely grateful. I think they were in shock to see their doctor show up with a gift for them. I was proud that folks in my department had made this happen and I told them that - I was a messenger of a bigger effort.

In my office I have been handing them out one-by-one. A patient of mine that does not speak any English began to cry. She looked at the interpreter and said in Spanish, “I am supposed to give him a gift, and he is giving me one?” She then turned to me as she wiped her eyes and in perfect English said, “Thank you, you are the best doctor.” Am I? As I have told so many students - patients will judge you not by what you know but by how you act. Or better yet, as Maya Angelou said, “People won't remember what you said or what even what you did, but they will remember how you made them feel.”

So to Judy Savageau and her team, I pass along that my patients feel loved because of the meaningful work of putting together these gift bags and baskets. They feel like someone cares about them. For some - that is a feeling they have not felt in a long time. That is a small good thing for them to feel. And the ripple effect of that warm feeling is that I get to feel good about being complicit in this generous act - I get to feel good to see their smile. As William Carlos Williams once said - “we hand each other along.”