



Thursday Memo – May 29, 2014

Mary Lindholm is our author this week; clerkship director of family medicine and family doctor at the Benedict building. Her reflection reminds us of where people come from, how we communally hand one another along, and how complex mental health issues can be. In the midst of all this, it is clear, is a caring family doctor - taking it all in, thinking about it, caring, and offering her support and kindness.

You can respond to Mary at mary.lindholm@umassmemorial.org or to the list serve in general. Enjoy!

Cat Problems

There is a cat problem in Worcester according to this morning's T&G. There are hundreds of strays and some kind people are saving money to try to spay as many as they can. This rekindles my thoughts of Cecelia, which have been smoldering in my mind since seeing her yesterday.

I've had the honor of knowing Cecelia for about 10 years. She has debilitating bipolar disease and is under the jurisdiction of DMH. Her psychiatrist sees her regularly and I address her hypothyroidism and other medical concerns. It took a few years and visits for Cecelia to trust me, but once she did she told me the story of how she came to Worcester.

Cecelia arrived in the United States from Europe with her infant son and started biking around the country. When she biked into Worcester she was hospitalized for her bipolar disease and her son was placed in foster care. This may be viewed as sad, but I felt kind of proud of Worcester and its social service agencies. I don't know the exact details, but I imagine that Cecelia was pretty mentally ill while biking around the country with her infant son in tow, and Worcester was the first place that stepped up and intervened.

Cecelia was placed in supervised housing and her son in foster care, but he was visiting her regularly by the time he was in high school. She could hardly contain her pride when he graduated high school and joined the armed services and even more when he returned with an honorable discharge. If I ask how he is doing, her face lights up.

This visit is a sad one though. It seems that Cecelia has been trying to help the cats of Worcester, and has accumulated about 18 cats in her apartment. The smell of ammonia was so overwhelming that she was sent to me to rule out any long lasting toxicity. The caseworker from the DPH had done her research, and Cecelia's escort handed me a list of potential problems that ammonia exposure could cause. I looked it over and asked Cecelia if her eyes were bothering her or burning. She told me, as her eyes brimmed with tears, that they are watering because she

is very sad at losing her cats. Also she wishes her parents were here as they would have helped her. I felt my eyes start to water a little as well. She was trying to do a good thing, we just weren't making sure her disease was under control enough for her to act rationally. We weren't parenting her as well as I know we can.

I ordered some labs recognizing that that the only abnormality would probably be her TSH as she has been refusing her levothyroxine lately. It turns out she hasn't seen her psychiatrist since last August. But Worcester, her psychiatrist, her DMH caseworkers and I are intervening and hopefully we can get Cecelia back on track. The cats may be a tougher problem though.