



Thursday Memo – January 15, 2015

Just a Little Applesauce - by Patricia Ruze

When you sign on to be a prison doctor, the job comes with a thick rulebook. No handshakes allowed (just ask Dr. Silk), no sleeveless tops, no open-toed shoes, no binder clips, no cell phones, no metal cans. Don't wear red. Don't wear green. Don't wear gray. No liquids more than 16oz, no silverware. No scarves allowed. No necklaces. There are reasons behind all of it. One very big rule is no favorites. Inmate-patients must be treated equally. That means no gifts, no phone calls to family, no mailing letters, no "lending" pens or pieces of paper--no special treatment.

Generally I am a good rule follower. Clear to all of us is that it's hard to get through medical training unless you are good at rules. But this one day at the clinic, I blew it.

Mr. M. was sent back toward my office around 5PM from our insulin line. He is a frail, elderly African-American with brittle diabetes and renal failure. I had been working hard adjusting his insulins, calibrating doses a little bit up or down every week. When I saw him that day he was a bit woozy, but not too out of it to tell me, "I'm 43". I snooped around a bit to find a nurse with the refrigerator keys so I could locate some clinic juice and a snack. Unfortunately we were short that evening and there was no nurse and no key to be found.

Fortunately, or so I thought, I had a bowl of applesauce I had not eaten at lunch. It was special applesauce that I had cooked the night before for my family. My sister-in-law and I picked the apples just the week before on a sunny, crisp, cool fall day in one of the little family-run orchards that decorate my town. We love Honey Crisp the best. I cook it up with the apple skins on and put in slices of lemon with its bright, tangy rind. I add whole cinnamon sticks--a reminder of holiday pies with family--and just a little sugar, a pinch of nutmeg and whole cloves

"What are you giving him"? yelled the Correctional Officer. "Sorry, his blood sugar was only 43. I couldn't find a nurse with the keys. I had to give him something quickly. I just didn't want him to seize". The officer grumbled, but decided to let it be.

For the next several months Mr. M. paid me uncomfortably special attention. With his advanced renal failure and erratic sugars he frequently reported to the health for labs, weights and BP checks. He would make a point to tap his cane on my office door as a "friendly" greeting and sometimes he would hang outside my office door waiting to catch a conversation. He often called my name and smiled through the fence when I made my way to the clinic some mornings. He began asking me for special medical items such as an extra diabetic snack, some moisturizing cream and an extra pillow. I made the point to him that I needed to treat every

patient fairly and equally providing what is only "medically necessary." At one point Mr. M. knocked on my door and asked to meet with me while I had another patient in the room undergoing an exam. That was the last straw. I told him that I had had enough and that he needed to stop tapping my door, asking for extra items and interrupting visits with other patients. From then on, he made little eye contact with me and refused to smile. He also went back to skipping his meds frequently, and eating more canteen food. So, not too long after the applesauce, Mr. M's fluid status and potassium became more difficult to control. He got an AV fistula and he was sent to another prison to begin dialysis. I felt defeated.

So, how can just a little applesauce become so problematic? When inmates have so little, little things take on tremendous importance. To an outsider, allowing an extra pillow to an elderly man with a bad back could represent mere kindness and humanity. A little applesauce could be a medically appropriate response to hypoglycemia. But here those extras mean so much more. Medical shoes, snacks, bottom bunks, canes, special soaps and moisturizers are status symbols in prison. Maybe there is even a deeper meaning; perhaps they suggest being special to someone.

I am reminded of Mr. M. occasionally when I review our hospital census. He's had another MI, multiple infections and amputations. He's not had an easy go of it and I hope he remembers that my applesauce was delicious. However, giving Mr. M. my applesauce was wrong and I won't share my lunch again. Mr. M. reminds me how correctional medicine is different and requires expertise and experience to negotiate some of these idiosyncrasies. It's never just a little applesauce.