



Thursday Memo – May 14, 2015

‘Thank You’ * - by Stefan Topolski

As old doctors retire - four gone this year - and I become the last young country doc standing in Franklin’s “West County”, I have taken up with something I swore I would never do - work day and night, sweep our creative art and community actions aside, and see patients from early morning house calls to late into the evening office hours. Some would say that is some seriously medieval old school medicine.

This evening as I return from house calls to step up onto our lit porch, I slowly set my key into the lock and again unlatch our door for evening hours. It is another day almost done. Our first patient, one old farmer, had taken ten years to come back again to see me. By now diabetes has wacked both his heart and kidneys hard. They are failing and the hospital saw fit to both change and increase his medicines ... so now, as sometimes happens, he is faring even worse.

After we stopped all of his medicines his body did as expected. It got better. He grows stronger for today and after days bed bound he stepped out onto his sunny porch way up in the hills just a mile shy of Vermont. I had learned that he hated school, left school early, and then went farming for 75 years. He has what we would today term a severe learning disability. Swimming upstream against diseases he does not understand it is hard for both of us.

Still, we carefully discussed his Do Not Resuscitate papers. After trying again to agree on something, he shook his head saying he wasn’t “never going to die”. His niece smiled as they stood up to go and shook my hand saying “I think he understands a little now. We’ve made it farther today in this discussion than we have in all the others together. Thank you.”

This elderly patient, one of my first when I came here to work 12 years ago, one with whom this egghead has perhaps nothing in common but a stubborn streak, shook my hand farmer-firm and broke out in a huge grin, “You are a very good friend.”

As this warm summer evening began wrapping up and winding down with my friend creeping slowly out, our last patient came to be hobbling in just as slowly on double-barrelled crutches. I braced for the worst. Here he was a young man, a family man with young children, with chronic pain, with opiate dependence and yet another surgery to make his crushed body a little more right... here was a man who knew we had not yet begun to cut down the pain killers - which we had agreed to lower - after his surgery and before his physical therapy would begin. I had even suggested a medicine called suboxone, a safer sort-of opiate, which he had adamantly declined to take last time.

He opens this last visit of a long day with a surprise as well. “I want to stop my pain meds, start suboxone, I know I have to do it.” Talk about a telepathic motivational interview, I thought, we have *got* to publish this technique! The brunt of our shared time over before it has begun, our talk then turns to his family, his love for them and likewise theirs for him, other more personal concerns that weigh on his heart, and worries that one of our smaller pharmacies might have mistreated him over the years because of the pain medicines he cannot live without.

We talked, I shared, he smiled, and then he leaned back up slowly to stand on his crutches to leave telling me “You know, I consider you a great doctor... Thank you. You listen, you’re honest, you really care. But I do want you to know [as if it might not be ok] that I also consider you a great friend.” We talk about meeting out on the water, his family in their fast boat and mine sailing, for a picnic “one of these years,” and I answer truthfully “I’d like that.”

Here are two very surprising human beings back to back to end another long twelve hour day. Despite a lack of time to steal from tonight’s rest for tomorrow, it inspires me to write this now and enjoy our success in creating a truly “patient-centered” healing home, a practice so different from all the approved “medical homes” in real life instead of on paper, and feeling deeply that the one person truly saying “Thank you” is me.