Thursday Memo – January 4, 2018

Gayle Stephens' Enduring Essays #5: "Final Words to Family Docs" (May 9, 2012): -- by Rick Flinders

Just Three Little Words…

I've been reflecting on how Gayle might have felt when composing these words for what he almost certainly knew would be his last public words to the physicians whose past and future he had so profoundly shaped. It was 2012 and, at the age of 85, he had pretty much declined any further interviews or public appearances. Nevertheless, Jay Lee had heroically succeeded in getting him to address the AAFP National Meeting for Special Constituencies that summer in Kansas City.

He looked out at his audience, diverse by definition and whose average age was less than half his own. He began by musing out loud what a man of his age could possibly offer an audience as young as they. After a couple of jokes with which he customarily warmed his audiences, he "got real" and put forward the classic rhetorical question famously posed by Francis Peabody nearly a century ago:

"What is the secret to caring for the patient?"

And in his own, inimical Missouri style, he echoed Peabody's famous reply in a version all his own:

"Give a damn!"

For G. Gayle Stephens this was no empty cliché. He then enumerated, in relentless expository fashion worthy of a Lincoln/Douglas debate, seven ways the truly caring physician can show that he/she gives a damn.

1. GIVE A DAMN:
"The first job is to 'give a damn' about everything that matters to patients and about what the patient chooses to do or not to do about their condition."

2. BE THERE:
"You can pretend that you know.
And you can pretend that you care.
But you cannot pretend to be there.
I recall a resident once who received a phone call from a nurse in the hospital to tell this doctor
that his patient had died. So the doctor says to the nurse 'do you think I ought to come?' If one has to ask that question, then something is missing in the physician's clinical repertoire."

3. TALK TO YOUR PATIENT:
"Sincere conversation is the primary clinical skill, the essence of creating a therapeutic relationship, the triumph of hearing over seeing."

4. KEEP YOUR PROMISES:
"It has been shown that if patients are able to trust their physicians, they are far more able to give up the secondary gains of illness. Remember this… and that you can make more promises than you can keep."

5. STOP WHINING, START RESISTING:
"Remember the power of our pen resides in the appointments we make, the checks we write and the contracts we sign. Most corporate entities expect their employees to be missionaries."

6. BE GRATEFUL:
"We are the recipients of great gifts, including the privilege of serving our patients, their trust and their permission for us to be there. So be grateful: a physician's benevolence springs most properly from a sense of gratitude, not feelings of philanthropy."

7. YOUR TIME AS A PATIENT WILL COME:
"Your turn to become a patient is inevitable. We're all going to be abused by this terrible system eventually and the closer I get, the more scared I become. Things fall apart quickly when one enters a hospital, especially when your illness is life-threatening or complicated. Strangers appear and the sicker you are, the less you know or remember about your "providers."
Meanwhile, who will speak for your patient, if not you?"