Thursday Memo – April 5, 2018

What happened after waiting 10 long minutes for the Albanian interpreter – by David Hatem

In clinic,

Needing to be done on time,

When someone put in a patient,

and in looking at the chart,

Wading through our new EHR,

In what seemed like a hidden corner,

That will not look so hidden when I figure out what the hell I am doing…

It looked like he should have been put in someone else’s schedule.

At times like this I sometimes begin to ask

The question

About why the clinic never works the way it should

Or why, instead of being able to finish what I was doing

before starting on the next thing…

But today,

Who knows why

I simply walked into the room to see
A thick, red faced sniffing man, close-cropped white hair, like many European men, I have seen on my few trips there.

In the room with him, A woman Black coat, Wool I think, Dark, rectangular glasses, Solid.

I say hello, Introduce myself, Met by silence, Then they talk with each other, In a language I do not understand, Yet they nod their heads when I ask if they need an interpreter, a translator.

Our new system, Uses the phone, I call up, Give my information,
Get cut off,
Not one, but
Two times,
And finally get them
17 minutes into a 20-minute visit.

Starting out aggravated,
I feel lightened when it is a straightforward cold,
Not much to translate for this,
No cultural factors at play,
It appears,
No hidden concern.

As with all others,
I ask if he smokes,
And he nods sheepishly,
Glancing over at the woman
I now know to be his wife,
As she nods approvingly at me,
And disapprovingly at him.
He holds up 10 fingers,
when I ask him how much he smokes,
quickly looking over at her
as she shakes her head from side to side,
showing me 1 finger,
and I know,  
that with their manual form of communication  
each is using a different unit of measurement,  
his, in cigarettes,  
hers, in packs  

we finish,  
do what we need to  
through the late interpreter,  
they say thank you  
in broken English.  

And having seen enough of their banter,  
I casually, maybe mischievously, say,  
“Oh…you should stop smoking”,  
as they are heading out the door  
and she smiles and nods,  
while he looks directly at me,  
moves his right hand,  
thumb, beneath his four fingers,  
moving up and down,  
the universal “talking” sign,”  
and says  
“blah, blah, blah”,  
and waves his hand dismissively at her,
seeming to push her out the door and down the hall,
then looks at me and smiles…
and she laughs,

And just this exchange,
No need of translation,
This perfectly clear communication,
Lightens the mood,
And suddenly,
For that moment,
I don’t feel quite so far behind.