Thursday Memo – February 28, 2019

This week I want to share with you what Dave Gilchrist wrote in the MA AFP newsletter this past month. Dave is former Medical Director of Hahnemann Family Health Center, a former resident of HFHC as well, has transitioned to Reliant, and is current President of the MA AFP. The title of his piece caught my eye as I have had a few moments on airplanes when I have the heard the call "Is there a doctor on board?" His sentiment struck me because each time this has happened to me, after the plane has landed a couple of different physicians - a dermatologist, an ophthalmologist and a psychiatrist said: "thank goodness you were here, I had no idea how I would have handled that." All the more reason that it is great to be a family doctor! Perhaps another one to add to Pam's list of "You know you're a family doctor if..." you're on a plane and they ask if there is a doctor on board and your hand shoots up without hesitation.

You can reply to Dave at david.gilchrist@reliantmedicalgroup.org or to the list serve directly. Enjoy.

Is There a Doctor on Board?

I remember hearing in medical school the vice dean tell her story of being on a plane and hearing the call for a doctor to help a passenger. It was the week after she graduated medical school so her confidence in being able to help was not what she had hoped but nonetheless she responded to the call for help.

Over fifteen years later, I had my first in flight request to help a passenger while traveling to Europe. During the overnight flight, I got up from sleeping and walked down the aisle of the plane only to find myself waking up on the floor and confused why the flight staff were around me. They seemed relieved that I was an MD and decided not to call for help right away despite the fact that I was confused and laying on the floor. After I realized I had my first episode of syncope on the flight, likely due to some dehydration and a vasovagal reaction, I reassured the staff I was fine.

On the flight back from Europe, however, an elderly male passenger had developed symptoms concerning for a stroke shortly after taking off. The flight crew overhead paged for any medical people or doctors to assist a passenger. A semi-retired anesthesiologist and myself evaluated the passenger with a slightly confusing story in broken English and resolving symptoms. We continued to monitor him throughout the flight and stayed in communication with the pilot and the
airline's medical doctor on call on the ground. Shortly before our crossing of the Atlantic Ocean I
decided to check on the passenger as a timely emergency landing would not be possible once over
the open water. The other physician had checked the vitals, which all seemed to be fine, but I knew
I wouldn't feel comfortable without a full neurologic exam to help put my mind at ease.

As I started to do my neuro exam, it was clear that the passenger was showing new stroke
symptoms and we requested an emergency landing in London to get him the proper medical
attention he needed. I spent the next 15 minutes before we landed answering the questions of the
man's wife about what this all meant, what would happen when we landed and providing her as
much reassurance as I could.

After the man was taken off the plane, I sat back and reflected on how my family medicine training
provided me with the comprehensive skills and knowledge to make me useful on that flight and in
so many situations. Whether it was reducing my neighbor's kid's nurse maid elbow, stitching up a
family member's hand when on vacation, checking on an elderly man at church with chest pain, or
providing answers to countless medical questions, family medicine trained me to do so much.