Jabs & Jibes

Too close to home

You know, I probably should not say this, but I will. I would admit you to the hospital if you had insurance." Mr Green looked a bit glum, and nodded his head in agreement, and did not need any further explanation about the type of financial burden I would place him under if I admitted him to hospital, even for a day or two, without insurance.

Mr Green was not due to see me for another 2 months, and he did not come in any more than he had to. He was a self-employed tile layer with impressive cal- luses on his knuckles from decades of hard work. Although he made a comfortable income as a skilled craftsman, he never thought that medical insurance was worth the expense. I had gently nudged him in this direction a few times. "Saving money on premiums makes sense if you are young and healthy, but if you get sick", I cautioned, "even a short stay in the hospital can be a financial disaster".

This time Mr Green thought perhaps he had the 'flu. The nurse had written down his weight and blood pressure, but had omitted his pulse. I glanced back and forth from the chart to the nurse to phone him on Monday—Saturday was our day off. The rest of the medical team was on call for inpatient care, but not for clinic. The worst memories of mishaps from my training days loomed over my shoulder. The nurse finished his cardiogram and I scrutinised the little complexes. I didn’t see any obvious features of ischaemia, but the fact that the rate was so fast made me nervous. Surely if Mr Green had wandered into the emergency department across the street instead of my office, the physician would recommend at least an overnight stay for intravenous fluids.

I glanced back and forth from the paperwork for today’s visit. Mr Green’s expectant face as he put his shirt back on. According to our book-keeping department, he already owed the practice more than $2000. An over night stay in the hospital would put him heavily in debt to the hospital as well. He was not having chest pain, but the fact that I had done work for friends of mine. I quickly found that my orderly process of making medical decisions was becoming clouded over with fears of what I would say to my friends if Mr Green died after I sent him home with a pat on the back and inane instructions to drink plenty of fluids. The worst memories of mishaps from my training days loomed over my shoulder. The nurse finished his cardiogram and I scrutinised the little complexes. I didn’t see any obvious features of ischaemia, but the fact that the rate was so fast made me nervous. Surely if Mr Green had wandered into the emergency department across the street instead of my office, the physician would recommend at least an overnight stay for intravenous fluids.

I glanced back and forth from the paperwork for today’s visit to Mr Green’s expectant face as he put his shirt back on. According to our book-keeping department, he already owed the practice more than $2000. An overnight stay in the hospital would put him heavily in debt to the hospital as well. Mr Green had a lot of confidence in me and I knew if I said he had to be admitted he would not argue with me. After a painful internal struggle I sent him home with a pep talk about drinking lots of clear fluids. Over the weekend I was troubled by visions that he had died or been admitted to the intensive care unit, while other doctors pondered over my foolish decision. Still fearful, I instructed the nurse to phone him on Monday—he reported that he felt much better and, of all, he thought it was sweet of us to call.

Larry Greenbaum

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LIFELINE

Sania Nishtar

Sania Nishtar is a clinical cardiologist who works in the private sector in Islamabad, Pakistan, with a career focus on preventive cardiology. She is founder and director of Heartfile, a non-profit organisation involved in pioneering work in cardiovascular-disease prevention in Pakistan. Heartfile targets the community and health professionals and its successful experiences are being replicated in other less-developed countries.

Who was your most influential teacher? Surprisingly enough it was my Golf instructor, who taught me the value of strategy, concentration, and recovery.

What research paper has had the most effect on your work? The Global Burden of Disease Study, which has been instrumental in steering my focus to the preventive rather than the curative approach in cardiovascular care in a developing world setting.

What would be your advice to a newly qualified doctor? Discover your work-related passions before you attempt to drive efforts with hard work.

How do you relax? At home with good music and the company of those I love after having met a pressing deadline at work.

What is the best piece of advice you have received and from whom? Discover your strengths, and work on them: my husband.

What part of your work gives you the most pleasure? To see my patients improve.

Where were you in your sibling order, and what did you gain or lose as a result? I was the second child, which taught me to give rather than take.

Describe your ethical outlook? I try hard to be God fearing and just.