

Please Call Me

By Richard S Ellin, MD

It always starts with a voicemail. "Hi, Dr Ellin, this is Mother W." The message is always the same. "Please call me when you get this message." She never just calls through the usual channels to make an appointment. She calls me, directly. And, inevitably, I call her back ... when I have time. For time is what it takes, because, after all, my time is what she wants, and perhaps time is what she needs. So we talk, and more often than not we arrange an appointment.

That's when it happens. By the time I'm ready to walk into the exam room to see her, I'm usually already behind schedule. "How long will this visit take?" I ask myself. "How much further behind will I get? Why can't I schedule a longer appointment for her?" Maybe today, just this once, after I take care of her problem, I'll explain to her that I'm running behind and I need to move on.

I enter the room. She always has a smile and a hug for me. Despite her 92 years, she stands to embrace me. "How are you, Mother W, it's so good to see you again." We exchange pleasantries, and I finally manage to steer the conversation around to her specific medical issues. Perhaps it's her leg swelling, perhaps dizziness, and so on. All the while, I'm trying to do the essential part of her exam as we talk. It truly does not take much of my time to decide which drug she needs more of, and which less. So in my structured way I tell her what she needs to do. I begin to sense that I'm doing well, this is going oh-so-smoothly, we're just about to wrap up, and it has only taken the 15 minutes I've allotted.

Then it happens. Hooked! She starts to tell me about her daughter, neighbor, children, friends, ex-husband, and on and on and on. And I'm frozen with fascination. And every time, I realize that for her, this is the meat of the visit. I'm her mirror, her son, her confidant, and her friend. So I listen sometimes for another 15-30 minutes, until she appears satisfied. The tears dry; the smile returns; and we part company until the next time.

I walk out of the room, now much further behind schedule, but for the first time all day, with a smile on my face and renewed compassion in my heart. ❖

The Doctor In Me

By Richard S Ellin, MD

"What do you mean, he's not talking right?"

"Well, I don't know, I mean, he's not able to say the words."

"Mom, when did this start?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe 20 minutes ago. It's happened before, but it usually goes away right away."

"Get ready to go to the hospital. I'll be right over."

I hung up the phone and at once felt ... what? Confused? Perhaps. But why? I've seen dozens, if not hundreds of strokes. I'm an experienced doctor. I know what to do when someone becomes aphasic. But this wasn't someone; it was my dad. And just that very fact seemed to rob me of all of my powers to act. All that I'd learned during 20 years of practicing medicine, those by now inbred reactions, seemed inaccessible to my conscious being. I wasn't in some post-call fog when one's thoughts and feelings are on time-delay. I was alert, lucid, and yet smothering all at once. What to do? This can't be a stroke—it's my father, for God's sake! Oh yes it is, said my other being. Quick—you have to get him to the hospital in less than three hours; he may be a candidate for thrombolytic therapy. "Oh, thank God, there you are!" The doctor in me was there after all. ❖

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