

Doctoring My Doctor

By Tom Janisse, MD

I got the call at sundown on Friday five minutes before walking out the door for my first free weekend in three weeks. The ER doctor on the phone said he had a patient with acute radicular low back pain, and hoped I could help. The patient, he said, was Dr Peter Devereaux, one of our internists, who, on exam and imaging, was free of spine abnormalities. He said he knew that I, as an anesthesiologist, was an expert, and did I think an epidural steroid injection would work?

I gulped, more anxious than I would have guessed to perform a spinal procedure, which I had done a thousand times, on a colleague. Afraid for a moment I could hurt another doctor, I wondered what if he was the one-in-a-thousand patient?

What if, while he lay helpless on a white sheet in the fetal position I advanced the 14 gauge metal behemoth through the skin and toward the spinal cord in search of the tiny, potential epidural space, and the needle slipped and I lacerated a lumbar spinal nerve, irreparably.

"Sure," I said, "I'd be glad to take care of him."

When Peter hobbled in, I was at once anxious and confident, concerned and

certain, of my skill. He smiled, and said he was so grateful I would help, and happy that I was the doctor on-call who would perform the spinal procedure he dreaded.

"Well, how was that Peter?" I said, withdrawing the needle. I had performed a flawless epidural puncture and injected dexamethasone and lidocaine bathing the spinal roots to shrink and numb them.

He sat up on the gurney, turned his head side to side, looking into the empty corners of the Recovery Unit and out the windows, now black pictures of night lights, and said, "You know, I think I'm starting to feel less pain already. Yes, the pain is definitely better."

"Great," I said, my heart rate plummeting. "Peter, I have a request." I had just received a letter at home from our Physician Health Committee encouraging each of our medical group to find a personal physician (like patient, like doctor): "Would you be my personal physician?" I said. "Turns out, I don't have a doctor. I was one of the 25% of our Health Plan member population who was unassigned and unbonded."

"I'd consider it an honor," Peter said. ♦

Tom Janisse, MD, founded *Peninhand Press* in 1977, in Volcano, California, and has published: short stories—*All Stories, All Kinds*; California oral history—*The Argonaut Mine Disaster*; and poetry books—*the volcano review 1-6, Peninhand, Falstaff Medical Poetry I and II*, and *Notes of a Cornerman*. His published works include: a poem, "Dying Distant," in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and a story, "Bring the Bottles," in the book *Emergency Room: Lives Saved and Lost: Doctors Tell Their Stories*. E-mail: tom.janisse@kp.org.