

Matrix Lesson 88

Learn the art of sitting

When I am on my deathbed at a major teaching hospital, thoughts of resident surgical life will pass through my addled mind.

In the gray dawn of early morning rounds, several white-cloaked people will stand and mumble at my bedside. It is as if a ritual religious service is about to begin in a medieval monastery. In this ritual, the acolytes must, before the prayers begin, assemble in a semicircular manner established by their rank. They must stand at the bedside before beginning their work. They bring out their prayer books and mumble, only to leave as I emerge from the arms of Morpheus.

As I emerge, I wonder: "What happened at my bedside? Was it a dream? Was it real or was it some drug-induced apparition? I know I have doctors, but these

ghostly visitors could not be from my world." They appear. They stand. They mumble. They disappear into the mists of the morning. Such is the custom of rounding in teaching hospitals.

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Unlike the dawn visitors, some surgeons have the unique ability to make every patient feel that as if they are the only patient on the service. I had partners like that. Despite multiple emergencies, difficult cases and the exigencies of the surgical day, these physicians could make anyone feel as if his problem, no matter how small or insignificant, is the only problem in the hospital at that time. What a wonderful attribute for a physician!

Part of communicating that essential feeling is their simple habit of sitting down during their rounds. Sitting is a powerful body signal. It tells the patient that you have the time to focus on his problem.

I hate to sit down. It is time-consuming. Once you sit down you actually have to listen to all sorts of things - complaints, concerns, interests and apprehensions - the four horsemen of the inefficient surgical day.

My friend, mentor and confidante, Dr. Leon Morgenstern, reviewing his own illustrious surgical teaching career, wrote: “During many years of practice, I had witnessed countless flying visits by both house staff and attending physicians, alone or in concert. Standing by the edge of the bed or towering over the patient at bedside, encounters were short, polite and often perfunctory. The importance of the visit was eclipsed by the pressures of time and tasks undone. Yet, for the patient this was the

event of the day - the doctor's visit is unmatched in importance by anything else that occurs before or after.”*

Dr. Morgenstern is right. His eloquent plea to sit down during rounds is the foundation for Matrix Lesson #88. Even if just the most junior member of the team sits down, the meaning is conveyed. It is my hope that this lesson will be learned in the context of the newly implemented eighty-hour work week.

There is now time for this most basic of surgical actions.