

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dr. Wolff is a board-certified family physician in private practice in Cornelius, North Carolina. He finished his family practice residency in 1997. He has graciously consented to share stories from the trenches of primary care. While his practice diary is taken from actual patient encounters, the reader should be aware that some medication references may represent off-label uses. Identifying details have been changed to protect patient confidentiality.

We at the *Companion* are certain that these vignettes will inform, entertain, challenge, and stimulate our readers in their effort to address behavioral issues in the everyday practice of medicine.

Sensitivity

Christian G. Wolff, M.D.

Monday

A note from one of my partners who was on call this weekend is on my desk this morning. One of my patients, JW, just received a diagnosis of metastatic squamous cell carcinoma after I sent him to an ear, nose, and throat specialist for evaluation of a neck mass. JW emotionally decompensated over the weekend and came in to our after-hours session on Saturday. I called JW this morning to see how he was doing; he appears to be okay for now. He couldn't say enough about my partner, who apparently broke into tears with both JW and his wife at that visit. That bit of compassion went a long way in helping JW through the weekend.

Tuesday

The old saw about events occurring in groups of 3 was reinforced today, as I saw 3 men in a row who all had new complaints consistent with diagnoses of bipolar depression. Other physicians sometimes tell me that they never see bipolar disorder, which amazes me. On the other hand, I wonder what diagnosis escapes me that is apparent to everyone else.

Wednesday

As a family physician, I write a lot of "notes" for patients. You know, excuse slips for school and work, that sort of thing. Another of my partners shared with me the tale of one of his patient encounters from this morning. He had just received a phone call from a luxury car dealer's sales office. Turns out that a patient of his had become floridly manic and bought a \$200,000 luxury car for a ride to the airport where he intended to fly to the Middle East and buy a half billion dollar resort complex. The car dealer needed a note to cancel the sales contract on the car. Now that's an excuse slip.

Thursday

I've been worried about PJ for a while now. I've taken care of her and her family for nearly a decade, and her boys have almost earned her a plaque on one of our waiting room chairs. Since her divorce a year ago, I could see that her affect had been slowly deteriorating. Today, she came in to ask about a poison ivy rash, but I could tell something was amiss. The question "How are you doing otherwise, I mean emotionally?" elicited a tearful response. "Can you tell?" she asked.

In the fragmented model of health care that many patients have today, I'm not sure that her needs would be met in some settings. Helping folks like this makes me glad I do what I do.

Friday

I just got my tickets in the mail to see Lyle Lovett in concert during a getaway weekend in Charlottesville, Va. You might think this information is in the diary to underscore the necessity for a doctor to care for his own family life as well as his patients'. Actually, I thought that anyone who sings that "Penguins are so sensitive to my needs" deserved mention in my column. ♦