

## 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.

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.

## Irritable? I'll Show You Irritable!

Christian G. Wolff, M.D.

### Monday

He's been back from his vacation for 3 weeks, and he looks horrible. JU is a 70-year-old fellow with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who is breathing the best in years but is a shaky miserable mess. Turns out that this widower of 10 years lost his dog while on the journey, after his pet was run over in the RV park wherein JU was camping. I know that dog was significantly exacerbating JU's pulmonary illness, but in JU's case, I think it's a shame he's gone.

### Tuesday

RT is in today for the fifth time in 2 weeks. Each of these visits has been accompanied by vague symptoms that have required extra attention, especially since this 45-year-old marketing executive underwent coronary artery bypass grafting 1 month ago. As we started the drill once more today, I interrupted him and asked bluntly if he thought he was getting depressed. He froze as if I had pulled out his power cord. Then, after a very long 15 seconds, he burst into tears.

I spent a solid 40 minutes counseling him about the high rates of depression after heart surgery, and he appeared relieved as he accepted a prescription for a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. If only all the patients after him could see his relief, perhaps they would be less annoyed in their delayed diagnosis of allergic rhinitis.

### Wednesday

BY is an engaging 37-year-old woman who presents to discuss her irritability. I am always a little apprehensive when I ask, "Can you give me an example of your irritability?" BY's frustration with her teenage daughter came to a crescendo while she took the garden shears to the satellite TV cables in the attic.

Interestingly, our church was promoting "Turn Off the TV Week" this past Sunday.

### Thursday

A new adult patient is on the schedule to "discuss attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder." I often shudder when I see that entry, and today I was not disappointed. DE is a 40-year-old woman who primarily complains of depression. In fact, she notes that her last physician had her on 5 different antidepressants that helped for 2 weeks before predictably failing. Until, of course, she took her daughter's methylphenidate for a week. During that time, she felt so good that she painted the kitchen—at 4:00 a.m.

She was more than a little irritated with me when I made her fill out a Mood Disorder Questionnaire, and doubly irritated when she learned I was suggesting a mood stabilizer rather than "meds I'm paying you to prescribe for me."

Sigh.

**Friday**

It's always good when the week ends on a good note. KT is in for his annual physical, during which he takes the opportunity to thank me for helping his 20-year-old daughter. His daughter, you see, has spent the last 8 years seeing numerous neurologists and psychiatrists who have prescribed any combination of antidepressants and stimulants you can think of, and all to no avail. Last month, after seeing me for the first time, we initiated an atypical antipsy-

chotic. KT notes that for the first time since the onset of puberty, his daughter is a pleasant and reasonable person.

I told him I was glad she was better, but that it's a heck of a lot easier after everyone else has tried the failed treatments to pick the one that might work. In fact, I shared the data with him that showed that the diagnosis of bipolar disease may take in excess of 5 years from presentation of symptoms. No matter to him—he's got his daughter back. That's all he cares about. ♦