

Recently, I became a better veterinarian. It's not that I attended a course, or read a newly published study. I didn't participate in one of the excellent programs offered at UC Davis. In fact, I didn't spend a single minute honing my diagnostic or surgical skills.

My new clinical acumen came from an unexpected experience, from the "other side of the bed", so to speak. It turns out my 79 year old father was hospitalized 2 days ago with mysterious gastro-intestinal problems. After trying, without success, to assess the problem via telephone calls, I found myself on a plane en route to Southern California to find out in person.

What an eye opening experience!

It's not that I've never had a family member in the hospital before. It's just that in the past we've always known early on what the problem was and what needed to be done to fix it. This time the diagnosis remained elusive.

Trying hard not to commit the medical equivalent of "back seat driving", I couldn't resist the temptation as the clinician in me took over. I thought to myself, "What are the blood test results? What drugs are on board? What are his latest vital numbers?" These were just a few of the questions I wanted answered. And another thing..."I'd really like to see those x-rays".

I couldn't help but be frustrated by how long it took to get anything done. We arrived the next morning at about 9am to meet with the doctor and are bluntly told the doctor is off today. A few more diplomatic questions revealed the doctor would be in today, but not until 1 pm.

In the meantime my dad is served breakfast and lunch. Two perfectly appetizing meals-only one problem-they're nothing close to what he had requested on the limited menu they offer to GI patients. We understandingly chalk this up to a simple mix-up in the kitchen...twice.

At 3 pm we finally met the doctor. We waited 6 hours for the doctor to arrive so we could spend 10 minutes talking about what little we knew about what was making my dad sick. "The CAT scan run the first day was normal," the doctor says. "CAT scan? What CAT scan?" I say quietly, as I give my dad that "you didn't tell me you had a CAT scan" look. The doctor says he's almost sure he remembers reading the "normal" CAT scan report in my dad's chart. He tells us he'll check the chart again, just to be sure. My dad says he doesn't remember a CAT scan, but he was feeling pretty sick that first night so he can't say for sure. Turns out, there was no CAT scan done (oops); so within the hour we're down having a CAT scan run. To his credit, the doctor seemed nice enough, and by all indications was a smart, albeit a little embarrassed, clinician.

By this time I was ready to march down to the administration office to file a formal complaint. The only thing that held me back was the mild relief of seeing my dad start to feel better. It was about this time that I had a strange felling that this all seemed a little familiar. In an odd kind of way I felt like I'd had some of these same frustrations before, but from a different perspective.

As Yogi Berra would say, "it's like Déjà vu all over again".

It wasn't long before I realized this situation was familiar because as a veterinarian I frequently work with pet owners frustrated like I was today. Worried pet owners-maybe even a little upset, worried pet owners-frustrated because I cannot always tell them why their pet is sick; anxious because sometimes it's not immediately clear how to treat and solve their pet's health problem.

During these difficult times, I often find myself asking pet owners to hang in there and try to be patient. I explain we're doing everything we can to get to the bottom of the problem; it's just that Mother Nature's not cooperating. Most pet owners eventually do realize that we are really trying to help.

But after today's experience at my dad's hospital bedside I understand the worried, anxious, nervous, occasionally upset pet owner better than ever before. As I'm certain is true with my father's doctor, I see and care for many patients in a given day; my responsibilities extend way beyond what may be in the hospital that day. Objectively, I'm sure most pet owners understand this, but frankly, when their pet is ill, logic and objectivity aren't (and maybe shouldn't be) the primary players.

All in all this long, somewhat frustrating, day taught me invaluable lessons about being on the "other side". It seems to me that medical practitioners should have to be a patient (or an owner of patients, in the case of veterinarians) once in a while. This would remind them that patients and their families have many non-scientific, subjective, emotional needs that should be addressed right along with all the symptoms, lab tests, x-ray findings and medications. This deeper understanding of the patient and family would surely improve a clinician's sensitivity, and ultimately the level of care the patient receives.

Oh, in case you were wondering, my dad is doing fine; and I'm back to work on the "other side" again. But now, when a worried pet owner seems a little less than calm and collected-I'll just smile and tell them I understand.

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