

Thoughts on the Changing Face of Healthcare and the Healthcare Industry

Having recently read an article of the growing number of Physicians who are so frustrated with changes that they are leaving their craft and retiring early, I needed to put some thoughts to print and think about how my career has been modified and circled back over the years in response to the financial and ethical demands of medicine.

As a Family Practitioner for over 30 years I adore my work, feel accomplished, know my patients well both health wise and life wise (their families, their jobs, their stresses, their accomplishments and their challenges.). I, like many others before me have tried HMO's, Concierge Medicine, private practice and Corporate Medicine. I teach Medical Students, Doctors in Training and Doctors in Practice the latest treatments and the most up to date developments in LGBTIQ2 healthcare not because I get paid, but because I enjoy teaching something no one else seems to know. I save lives by giving lectures about Prep and Pep, state of the art prophylaxis of HIV and each practitioner who "gets it" will prevent the spread of the HIV virus saving even more lives with a simple tablet a day.

To survive financially in this time of healthcare, I tried corporate medicine like many others before me. The business aspect was taken care of, my malpractice, health insurance was covered and I had access to electronic medical records. Not to mention a healthy financial incentive. I loved my colleagues and enjoyed working with a team at my back and at the ready. It seemed like a brilliant concept but at what cost???

The drawback? The patient interactions became shorter, the sense that I could be missing a critical diagnosis grew every day. I left for work at 5am to do computer work till patients started at 7:30 and spent as much time as I could: scheduled till 6 but working until 8 to give patients the time they needed. Then it was computer time for 2-3 hours and returned home exhausted at 10, often not having eaten and falling directly to bed with clothes on only to wake at 4, undress shower dress and do it again. I had entered the treadmill and it became more and more unforgiving with each day. This was not "good medicine" as I had known it from my private practice days. Healthcare shifted from patient focus and good listening to seeing an exhausting case load of patient and a myriad of RVU minimums and incentives. My joy was gone, my self esteem plummeted, my life was no longer in my control, my husband didn't see me nor did my grandchild because I was too exhausted to function. I was a dinosaur, a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. Clearly, the new model of medicine that promised \$\$\$ but at the unforeseen cost of my soul and the inability to utilize the full scope of my profession in order to "funnel to the specialists" proved frustrating, disappointing and truly heartbreaking. My mood changed, my love of figuring out a tough diagnosis, reading up on cases and at times spending 1-2 hours on literature searches and gave way to seeing the minimum amount 16-18 patients in record time and make accurate spot on diagnoses or transfer them to a specialist in order to save time. Something had to give.... and it was at the risk of my sanity and satisfaction of a career in family medicine that afforded so much diversity: minor surgery, orthopedics, dermatology, Gyn, internal medicine and now LGBTIQ2 - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersexed, Queer, 2 and Non-Binary Medicine; an entire community at great emotional and physical health risk. I have learned and taught transitional medicine as a means of helping patients to change their biological or natal genders to one of gender identity and have utilized our ability to block HIV transmission in high risk individuals with one tablet a day. I continue to keep abreast of cutting edge primary care and love the diversity and scope of the speciality because it is all so fascinating and ever changing.

I left after a lot of soul searching and months of misery and fear of financial collapse and returned to what I now call Value Based Medicine. I see a maximum of 7- 10 patients a day and offer them as much time as they need and address as many issues as I can. In return, my patients pay in full at time of service and apply for reimbursement for out of network expenses with Insurance ready forms. No one complains, not because it isn't an expensive layout, but because the value of healthcare is being fastidious, being obsessive compulsive, LISTENING to your patients and sometimes hand holding and helping people get through the rough spots in life. I was privy to that as a child and my personal physician, much like myself, takes time and listens and truly cares about my health and welfare. To me, that's worth everything.

I am hugged by my patients, many of whom call me Tom and am welcomed back into their lives with open

arms. I relish hearing stories of their lives and share stories of my own. I hear over and over again my patients concerns about myself while I was on the treadmill. "We were worried about you... you didn't seem like your old self. You looked tired and unhappy; we couldn't imagine how you could make this change... you just weren't you! Now you're happy again... it's all over your face!!! You're a real old-fashioned family doctor" - the finest compliment I could ever get.

Yes, is it frustrating being in debt again at 56 and running a business? Yes indeed. But my happiness level and sense of joy, accomplishment and self-esteem are back up where I know I'm making a difference and I know I'm fulfilling a legacy dating back generations. And yes I worry every day if this is sustainable and have I "cut my nose off to spite my face." But I consider myself not just a physician but a healer and I just don't fit into a system that values revenue more than exceptional care which is what I have also strived to perform.

First week on my own I listened to a 24 year old man talking about blood in his stool. Given 15 minutes, I might have chalked this up to hemorrhoids... after all the young man was 24. But I listened and I asked more questions and I spent the time needed to say, there's more here than meets the eye. An urgent colonoscopy later, the young man was diagnosed with colon cancer, it was resected and he is doing well. I had the affirmation I needed to remind me i had made the right choice. It haunts me that had I rushed I might have missed the diagnosis.

Medicine has changed before and in 30 years I have seen so many vacillations in concepts. This isn't the medicine I envisioned... so I needed to reinvent myself again at 56 and start from scratch. I sleep at night, I spend time with my husband and time with my patients. I didn't choose family medicine to be wealthy; (financially it's one of the lowest paid specialties just above Pediatrics). I chose it for its diversity, challenges and the profound intimacy of the doctor:patient relationship. I wanted to be the quarterback of medicine and look past "a heart, lung, a brain, an organ." I wanted to see the whole person, not just the disease.

I'm not singing the blues and I'm not "raking in the bucks." I'm loving my career again and I'm seeing the benefits of my work/doctor ethics and I don't ever envision when I would fully retire. Why do so when you love your career? I have a sign in my office that reads, "if you love what you do, you never work a day in your life." I aspire to that. But believe me when I say I do worry if I can sustain financially what I believe in... only time will tell.

The pendulum will swing again. I hope I'm ahead of it but if I'm not, I'm proud of my career and I'm proud of my caregiving and thank God, I deeply love what I've chosen as a career. Could this all fall apart? Absolutely. Could my desire to fulfill a promise and an Oath of Hippocrates give way to financial collapse for my entire family... yes, that is the cloud that hangs over my head. But I can smile through the rain and I can even laugh in the rain... and rain is just water.

I dedicate this diatribe to my son, Jarett, who encouraged me to make a change at this late stage of life. The young man I did my best to raise even when I wasn't around so much had now become the teacher and voice of reason. "Jarrett, you're 35, it's easy to make a change at this stage of life.... his response (so simple really)... if you're miserable you try to make it work or you walk away. If you are a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, you either compromise and settle for the perks or you move forward in a way that makes you happy. I am blessed.

Tom Ziering, MD, FAAFP