



Robotic Patients?



By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

The patients! The patients! Ordinary men and women. What is happening to them? I just finished reading an article in the Wall Street Journal, entitled DEAL WITH OUR DOCTORS, all about technological breakthroughs.

Only once was there a whiff of humanity. What I mean is, there was little, if any, concern for the ultimate effect on patients of the receipt of that technology.

I recall a friend whose father in England suffered from diabetes and was sent to the hospital and the hospitalist to have a leg amputated. The daughter went over to be with and comfort him. The operation was performed but no one in the family was told. The surgeon was incommunicado. How was the father? Questionable.

Frustrated, our friend telephoned her doctor in Sacramento who, in turn, telephoned the surgeon in England. They talked and the results of the operation and the father's condition were obtained. I suppose the telephone technology was admirable, but it was a cold comfort for the daughter.

Costly new technology now allows a doctor to put his records into a file somewhere. Then the records are available in the hospital if hospitalization is necessary. They can also be pulled for the emergency room if the patient goes there. They are on hand for an unexpected appointment in the office. Automatic orders bring the patient in at the proper time, may remind the patient of treatment and directions, may adjust medications.

That is, providing the patient has a computer or something similar. I visualize patients as automatons, standing in their rooms, waiting. I suppose patients can still think for themselves, but they do not have to exert themselves. It is an easy arrangement for medical care and probably the government supports it.

One spot where some conditions cannot be controlled is in obstetrics. Labor and normal delivery proceed as always. The enthusiasm for skipping labor and timing deliveries has waned, for the good of the woman. Still, it is hard to leave normal processes alone. Perinatal technology has resulted in many healthy babies. In many other fields patients are automatons, moving to a button here, or an order there. In obstetrics the joys and sorrows of individuals are not yet secondary to record-keeping and robot building. But there is a bombardment of technological advances nevertheless.

Abnormal babies are being operated upon before birth and prematures preserved even though there may be abnormalities in years following. It is cruel even to mention denying treatment or experimentation to extend life in any form.

We try and try again to make the perfect individual, to save every living thing. It was not always so. I have been reading some Scottish history and was reminded of one of the heroes, the Bruce of spider fame. Defeated in battle and discouraged, Bruce crawled into a cave to rest and eventually noticed a spider on the ceiling trying to weave its web. He watched the spider attempt over and over to attach a piece of its web to a distant spot.

When it finally succeeded, Bruce, encouraged and renewed, marched his troops into a killing battle that secured victory.

We are on the way to promise the birth of healthy babies by means of gene therapy ~ locating, removing, correcting . Here, the patient does receive attention. In general, though, the personal touch is being lost in technological changes. Computer health chats are not substitutes for warm bodies. What we have considered the friendship of the good old days is slipping farther and farther into limbo.

What worries me is whether younger generations can look beyond technological visions. In addition to saving money, reducing errors, making efficient use of time, will life be improved? Will people be happier?

Someone made the comment about "biotechnology leading to an eclipse of human dignity." We must try and try again to save the personal element, the humanity, in medical care for the patients.

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