



## A Doctor in Quarantine

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By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

**It was the 1930s. The author, then a resident, caught the chickenpox and ended up on a hospital ward with 23 empty beds for company.**

As the weather cooled and the Fall leaves turned red, I began to sneeze and cough. "Another cold," I thought. A fresh epidemic of respiratory infections beginning, probably. There was no place for sickness at the Chicago Maternity Center. I would try to control it early. Maybe it would go away. My head ached, and I took aspirin and atropine to relieve the symptoms and vowed to sleep every extra minute available.

Monday morning was set aside to lecture the new medical students on home deliveries. The demonstration was arranged in the Assistant Director's room, on his narrow bed. This Monday my nose ran in spite of the atropine and I had difficulty wiping, talking and rolling the newspapers for the setup, all at once.

Unfortunately for me, this group was eager. They asked innumerable questions, hung on every word and would not be slighted. I finished by noon, ate lunch, helped in the outpatient clinic and made calls around the city until dinner. Still miserable, I went to bed early.

I slept all night, except for some telephone advice and woke in the morning, uneasy and uncomfortable. I was itchy in spots. There were places I wanted to scratch, on my scalp and chest and stomach. My head ached. I felt terrible.

There were lumps in my hair. Now what? I slid out of bed and stood in front of the closet looking glass. There was a blister on my neck. I was unable to see the lumps in my hair. I pulled up my pajama top and found several spots on my stomach. I closed my eyes. Chickenpox! I had never seen a case, but I knew. Chickenpox!

I crawled back into bed and telephoned the switchboard downstairs. Emergencies meant action and, in seconds, the Director and Assistant Director swooped in. They stopped just inside the door and glowered. The Center was contaminated!

"Do you mean to tell me you have not had chickenpox?"

"No," I said, overcome with guilt.

"Well!" said the Director. "You certainly can't stay here!"

"She certainly can't!" echoed the Assistant Director.

Probably a Resident would never be hired again unless without a full roster of childhood diseases.

"Where did you get it?"

"How do I know?"

"Have you seen any patients with chickenpox?"

"Not that I know of."

The Director looked me over thoughtfully. I could feel her thinking, would this Resident know a case of chickenpox if she did see one?

They left and, in about an hour, I was told I would be taken to the Chicago Contagious Disease Hospital.

They had first tried the old Smallpox Pest House. There was a chance I might have smallpox, even though I showed them the big vaccination scar on my leg and the Public Health Department said there was not another case of chickenpox in the whole of Chicago! But the Pest House was closed. The Contagious Disease Hospital would take me, but they were skeptical.

The Assistant Director tried to cheer me. "You're going to get a ride in the newest car on the police force, a Lincoln." Small comfort.

There were no rules to follow for staff health care. I was being shunted to a County institution. I considered refusing to go and insisting upon Billing's and the University of Chicago, to which the Center was loosely connected, but I was afraid I would have to pay my own way and I did not want to write home for money. I would have good care at the Contagious Disease Hospital, I supposed, but my feelings were hurt.

What happened when other personnel got sick? Fortunately, the nurses stayed well. Medical students were sent back to their respective schools and interns were shipped home, wherever that might be. One intern developed Vincent's angina, a sore mouth caused by a spirochete on a dirty glass, and another had come down with hepatitis and jaundice. Those who were ill disappeared.

I could take nothing with me. Everything that went in would stay, or be burned. My clothes would be thoroughly sterilized, ruined, but ready to wear when I came out. Everyone at the Center backed off. I walked out alone and climbed into the police car. The officer was glum and uncommunicative. A fetch and carry! And chickenpox!

At the hospital, I undressed and my clothes were whipped away. I sat naked and cold on the end of a metal examination table. The Resident on duty scrutinized every spot minutely. He was not sure at all, he said, that this was not smallpox. I was too old and had been around too much not to have come down with chickenpox earlier. He finally gave me a gown and the nurses wheeled me in a chair to the elevator which took me to the third and top floor.

The elevator door opened directly into a ward with no other patients, only 23 empty beds. They put me in the one slightly to the left of the elevator. They pointed to the bathroom a quarter of a block away and, before leaving, instructed me not to touch the telephone on the nurse's vacant desk.

"Suppose I need emergency help?"

They laughed. "With chickenpox?"

Then they rode away in the elevator. There was no one to talk to, or complain to. There were no papers, no books, no sheets of paper, no pencils, no radio. I was itchy and my head was splitting. There were no sedatives, either.

This ward was on the top of the hospital, one big room, three walls of half-glass. The

elevator side was solid, the bathroom at one end of it. A rising storm whistled around the corners and rattled the window panes. I was sick and depressed. My bosses were heartless. How sincere could they be in wanting to help suffering womankind? I should be pregnant! Would that make a difference? If I had been aggressive I would have begun to fight for the rights and better health care of interns and residents. I thought I could feel the remaining soft edges of my character harden.

The staff at the Contagious Disease Hospital were kind. The Residents visited me daily after their rounds on the diphtheria, scarlet fever and whooping cough downstairs. One found an old radio that brought in a morning station when the weather was right. On these days I followed the soap operas, listening attentively to every word, living and dying with each crisis. One nurse brought extra food on the trays, a second piece of bread and a glass of cream instead of milk. For Thanksgiving I had two glasses of cream as well as turkey. I gained weight.

In a few days, I risked a visit from the superintendent by using the telephone to call a University of Chicago nurse I knew. I asked for slippers and toilet articles and magazines. She sent the things over and I could last a few more days.

Chickenpox was supposed to be a laughingly mild disease. It turned out to be uncomfortable and nasty. There was no treatment to hurry the scabs, or keep them from forming in the first place. One Resident brought up a bottle of Tincture of Merthiolate and suggested I paint each blistery spot. "Who knows," he said, "it might do some good."

I was covered with spots, and I whiled away a few hours in the painting. I could not see myself. Anyhow, my sense of humor was entirely gone, and I was not a bit amused at the startled looks on the faces of the occupants of the elevator.

The front of that elevator was clear glass. I could hear the grind of gears on the floor below and soon learned to expect any kind of head about 10 feet beyond the foot of my bed.

The first winter storm moaned around the building and blew snow against the glass panes. Workmen rode up to fix pipes and vents and windows. I was more or less prepared for the elevator's arrival when it emptied a class of medical students and the professor one morning. None of the group had seen a case of chickenpox. They were also amazed because the patient they were observing had been their instructor at the Maternity Center, the one who had sneezed at them. The professor was disgusted when he saw the bright pink Merthiolate. His typical picture was spoiled. I was unfit even for a demonstration!

I lay in bed until every black scab dropped off. Only then was I considered non-infectious and ready for dismissal. Only then would I be allowed back in the Maternity Center.

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