



Scrubs on the Sidewalk



By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

ONE NOON, BETWEEN RAIN SHOWERS, I walked my dog around the neighborhood. It was routine and we observed fresh flowers blooming, new home renovations, and other dog walkers. Then, unexpectedly, we found ourselves following three hospital workers.

We were too far away to read badges, but we knew they were hospital personnel because they were outfitted in green scrubs, even to green covers over their shoes. They moseyed on into the hospital.

Suddenly, I was alarmed.

In fact, horrified! Were these scrubs and covers supposed to wander the streets? Didn't my dog sniff along the same route? Didn't that elderly gentleman we passed cough and spit on the sidewalk?

But perhaps these scrubs and covers were meant to keep regular clothes and shoes clean inside the hospital. No, I didn't think so.

I once had a professor of medicine during the early fight against the scourge of tuberculosis. There were no curative drugs at the time and he told us he worried about the way stacks of morning newspapers were thrown into the gutters for newsboys to pick up and deliver.

The gutters were filthy.

Weren't the papers contaminated? And couldn't the bacteria be spread into unsuspecting homes?

Much has been learned since then. Tuberculosis cases decreased for awhile, but now, for several reasons, the incidence is up again. Swallowing a drug that was lethal for the organism in the tissues was easy. Antibiotics helped other diseases. Notwithstanding, laxness is also easy.

And the growth of forgetfulness is what vetos a disease-free community.

What is infection? Can it be avoided? Bacteria have been around before our civilization. Probably viruses and prions and perhaps some disease producers yet undiscovered. We know these microorganisms are all persistent and that they take advantage of every opportunity to enrich themselves at human expense.

The homes that opened to care for the sick gradually became hospitals and, through ignorance, gradually became places in which to die. They were feared.

But, with the discovery of the cause of infection, they became places of healing and renewal. Eventually, though, what made the hospitals commendable was overlooked. Neg-ligence. The past was forgotten.

Why do gowns cover street clothes in a hospital setting? In surgery, why is there a change into clean and sometimes sterilized pants and tops? Why are shoes changed, or covered?.

Consider the individuals who proudly come to work while suffering from "colds" or the "flu." "I'm running a little fever, but I'm not coughing much." Only if the "flu" turns out to be SARS is there panic. Yet, surgical and accidental wounds stand ready to accept infection and complicate healing. We use the word "nosocomial" freely. Seems to give dignity to the germ.

I had been wondering what drama there was to write about and I had only to look along the street where I live.

Indeed, my dog, Michael, and I could have followed the scrub-clad workers from the street into the hospital corridors. No one would have noticed and Michael would have loved the change.

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