

In and Out of the Theater

Category: Hospitalized

written by Anthony Papagiannis | June 16, 2025

I watch the ceiling lights pass by as I am wheeled to the operating theater. I have made such trips before: Over the 20-odd years I've worked here I've had an assortment of surgical procedures, ranging from a cholecystectomy to the repair of a half-torn shoulder tendon.

Today's trip is different. One week earlier, unexpectedly, I passed a lot of blood. A colonoscopy disclosed a sigmoid tumor; surgery was arranged without delay. I have spent two days on rigorous bowel cleansing, praying the tumor is operable. Now here I am, going into the theater, wondering whether I will wake up with a colostomy or with further grim news.

The anesthetist is an old friend: his father, mother, and sister have all been my patients. While the surgeon, another friend, is scrubbing in, the anesthetist cannulates my veins and starts the countdown to oblivion.

"Dr P, wake up! Time to move to your bed." The recovery room nurse sounds encouraging. I briefly open my eyes to her smiling face; we have worked together numerous times. My foggy brain registers that at least I don't need intensive care. Minutes later, still half asleep, I make the return trip to my hospital room.

Over the ensuing days, I have plenty of opportunity to experience the tender care of the ward staff. Most of the nurses have been with the hospital for several years; some I met when they were still students. With their help, I move through the recovery stages: getting out of bed; moving around with a host of surgical appendages; gradually shedding drips, catheters, drains, and my nasogastric tube. A bowl of yogurt after several days of fasting tastes like nectar.

I think of the numerous patients I have referred for surgery during my career. They must have endured all the discomforts I've experienced these last few days, and many more. My professional training has given me much theoretical knowledge about diseases and procedures, but this firsthand experience is postgraduate training at a different level. Now I can tell my future patients that I truly know what I'm sending them to.

On the day of my discharge, the surgeon comes around with the pathology report. The tumor was removed without need for a surgical opening in my bowel, though some positive nodes dictate chemotherapy, which will follow in due course.

I offer to walk to the waiting car, but the nurse insists on a wheelchair. "Save your strength, Doc," she says. "Farewell, and come back soon!"

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