

A Big Bag of Pills

Category: Pills

written by Susan Dirks | July 14, 2023

He said he wanted to talk to me. He asked for me by name. He was seated in the waiting room, a lone pale face in a room full of brown faces. I asked my medical assistant to query him as to why he was there, while I continued to see patients; he told her he had something to give me—something he could give only to me.

We are a small primary care office of three women: two medical assistants and me. Our office is in an area of town with visible crime—an open-air drug market across the street and bullet holes in our front door. Most of my patients' families have been impacted by gun violence. I am always on my guard, assessing exit strategies for myself, my staff, and my patients.

Now, I peered out into the waiting room. I did not recognize this young man, who sat there with a sizeable bag on his lap. He was not one of my patients.

I talked with my medical assistants and devised a plan. We would empty the waiting room by calling patients in one at a time and instructing them to exit out the back door and wait in the parking lot. When the stranger was left alone in the waiting room, I would call 911 and ask the police to come. Eventually, the waiting room was cleared, and the stranger was getting fidgety. I pushed our panic button (repeatedly). After 10 minutes or so, two officers barged through the door with guns drawn. The young man raised his hands and said he was the son of one of my patients. His mother had left town. In the bulging bag on his lap were boxes and bottles of her 20-odd medications. He had not known what to do with all the pills, so he'd brought them to me.

We received a thorough tongue lashing from the police officer for pushing the panic button for a nonemergency.

I could have handled it better. I could have gone out and spoken to the stranger—but I was afraid. Afraid because he'd said he had something he could give only to me: a big bag of pills.

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