

Quick or Lengthy Decisions

Category: Tough Calls

written by Marilyn Barton | October 31, 2023

One winter night, when I was a child, I kept asking for TUMS and spiked a fever. Intense pain shot through my body. My stomach felt hard as a rock. Our family physician rushed from his house nearby to check on me. Using a few tools from his medical bag, Dr. Hart performed an assessment.

Ambulance services weren't available for us in 1956, so the doctor and my father wrapped me in a blanket and placed me on the front seat of the car. My father didn't drive. He flew. Enroute to the hospital, a police siren stopped us. Before the officer could speak, my father opened his door widely, pointed to me, and yelled, "She needs emergency surgery." Off we went.

Shortly after arrival at Community Hospital, another doctor placed an ether-filled mask over my face. I counted back from 10...9...8 then was out. Apparently, the surgeon removed my appendix right after it burst. Bacteria was spreading through my system. Good news, the antibiotics saved me from an overwhelming infection, but I spent six weeks recovering on the children's ward.

In later years, whenever a doctor saw that I'd had surgery for a perforated appendix, he'd remark, "Wow, must've been a tough call on a six-year-old."

I'd reply, "In some cases, don't you think medical diagnoses were quicker back then when GPs had to rely on their skills and wits without benefit of scans, lab tests and consultants?"

Despite advances in medical care, tough calls continue. In 1996, after years as a bedside RN with lifting, pushing, turning and pulling patients, I developed horrible pain in my lower back. My family physician took X-rays, said I had a bit of arthritis in my spine then sent me to an orthopedic surgeon. He read the same X-rays, declared I had degenerative disease and got an MRI. It turned out to be inconclusive, so the ortho referred me to a neurosurgeon. He determined it looked like normal aging but needed to do a myelogram because of the pain. This revealed areas that did not illuminate with contrast. Consistent with a herniated disc. The calculated decision-making process came to an end, and I had a successful lumbar laminectomy.

Whereas the tough call about whether to perform back surgery required three physicians, multiple imaging tests, and four months, my family doctor made a life-saving decision in about four seconds with his hands and a physical exam.

*Marilyn Barton
Hampton, Virginia*

