PERSPECTIVES

Blood Brothers

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Finalist, 1997 Creative Medical Writing Contest

It's like the time when I was 10 and tried to jimmy a raisin bagel out of the toaster using a fork. If there's a more accurate word than "zapped," it isn't English—like crizzplooped, or something. A wiry wave of electrizzzity streaked through my entire body and threw me back against the wall. My mother, more frightened by the shock than angry at me, screeched as I struggled to recover.

"How many times have I told you to NEVER put a utensil into the toaster?"

I was mute; still dazed and afraid.

"How many times? Dear God, you could kill yourself, Timothy!"

My mother slumped over to where I was still resting against the counter and cried. If she hadn't been there, it probably wouldn't have felt so bad. I was punished then and I'll be punished now. Somehow or another.

This time, however, there wasn't anyone to witness my transgression. I was 15 years older now and alone—just like my mother said I'd be.

"I won't always be here to protect you," Ma would say, "so you're going to have to learn responsibility."

I think I was the only one in my generation who listened. Here I was, on a sunny and beautiful California Sunday, in a dark and dingy hospital being responsible. Of course, I realized how lucky I was to have been among those chosen to attend medical school. How lucky I was to be me . . . and not my patient—the emaciated ghost of a man in the bed beside my throbbing leg. But I didn't feel lucky. This was the worst I had felt in years. It was an accident, but it felt worse.

I could still feel the sensation creeping through my skin and bones. As if a fine mist of acid and icicles had drizzled down on me, I immediately felt hot, then cold—almost numb. I could feel every millimeter of my flesh. Small beads of sweat began to pop out on my forehead and upper lip, and a pool of moisture started to form in my pits—"axilla" to the medical personnel among us. I once got in trouble for saying "pits" when an instructor gave me an impromptu anatomy quiz on the brachial nerve plexus. I hadn't meant it to be amusing either. That was the pitiable part. Oh, well. It's funny what can seem important in a given situation.

Speaking of situations, I should get my mind back on my current predicament. If I could only think straight. I feel as though I may pass out. I wish I actually could pass out. That would make the whole stupid thing at least seem dramatic *and* I could have the added bonus of lost consciousness.

I've got to try to concentrate. Can I make it to the sink? I look over towards the washbasin; it's surrounded by sink stuff—soap, hand lotion, a bottle of generic mouthwash. A paper-towel dispenser is mounted on the side. From where I'm sitting I can just barely read the warning sticker pasted on the dispenser:

"Body Substance Isolation Precautions: Body Substances Include Blood, Mucus, Saliva, Urine, Semen, Feces, and Other Gastrointestinal and Vaginal Secretions."

My stomach recoils. I have always tried to "isolate" feces, urine, and mucus. But the other stuff is questionable. I mean, does having a burning desire to swap spit with my girlfriend eliminate me from the cautious?

Vaginal secretions? I live for them! And the blood thing. That is especially tenuous. How can a woman ever escape blood? Or man escape women? It goes way back to ancient times. The Mayans, back when they ruled Mexican turf, were particularly fond of the ruby nectar. If the stakes were high enough, the Mayan king himself would make a blood sacrifice. He would, with great ceremony, pierce his own foreskin with the tip of a stingray quill. The issuing blood would then drip onto sacred papyrus which would be immediately burned. The smoke was said to take the image of a god and allow communication between them. It only took three drops—even less than I just got. Even less than me and Billy Anderson used when we slit our thumbs in third grade to become best friends—blood brothers.

God, I swear, my mind is full of crap, but I was concentrating! Why did this happen! Well, my body has calmed down, if not my psyche.

The syringe, still filled with a terrifying mixture of both my and his blood, has dislodged itself from my leg. It fell out when I jumped up in shock and is now oozing crimson arterial blood onto my latex-clad fingers. Lot of good the gloves did me since the whole contraption slipped out of my hand and landed in my quadriceps. A lifetime of condom use down the drain in the blink of an eye. Now I guess I must be in some self-hatred phase because I can't stop thinking what an idiot I am. Damn! I replay it over

and over in my mind. There, it can be prevented; here, it is already a calamity.

My patient was barely awake when I came in to draw the blood gas and now he has fallen back to sleep. I guess this is old hat for him since he's been HIV positive for years. Nevertheless, I quietly excuse myself from his bedside and dazedly walk to the sink. I'm sure we can both recite the mantra of statistics: there's a 1-in-300 chance of seroconverting from a needlestick; this chance is higher with intramuscular injections and almost nil with a mucosal splash. There's my luck again.

Tossing the needled syringe into the sharps container next to the sink, I reflect on the absurdity of its location. Who does procedures over the sink? I carefully deglove and wash up as best I can, despite having already been "exposed." Neatness counts, eh?

Like the beating tribal drums of our primitive ancestors, the blood pulses through my body concentrating my growing fear, despair, and irrational superstition with each successive beat. With great clarity of mind, I realize what I need to do.

I will take a bottle of isopropyl alcohol from the nursing supplies station and go to the showers in the basement by the student call rooms. I will walk as slowly as possible to keep the new blood from getting too far into my system. When I am in the shower—ice cold, so as to prevent an increase in circulation—I will manually force that blood out of my leg. It is still bleeding from the puncture, so I know it can be done. I will press, and rub, and squeeze all of the blood from my leg if I have to, to get it out. Then rinse with alcohol. Over and over. I do not want to stay blood brothers with my patient. When I am sure that I have done all I can to heal myself, I'll get dressed again, and try to find the needlestick protocol that they casually gave us during our orientation to the hospital last month.

I can't help but think of how cows are killed for kosher meat preparation. First they are drained of blood—supervised by a special kind of rabbi; perhaps I'd best call a rabbi before I notify the nurse in the OSHA office. She will take my blood and she'll force AZT on me, but I think that now I could really use a rabbi—or at least a nice kosher meal.