Mr. McWilliams and the Ingrown Nail

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The following account was related to me by J. M. Crane, MD, whom I happened to meet in a hotel bar in St. Louis. The year was 1999 and Dr. Crane had long since retired from his general practice in a small town just upstream from the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. Although his heritage and his drink gave him access to far greater inventiveness in his narrative, this is his story as best I can recall.

Mr. McWilliams had spent 3 days with his right foot soaking in Epsom salts. He was not unfamiliar with Epsom salts having contributed to the Social Security Trust Fund for 45 years as a bricklayer. His wife was born and raised in the Ozark Mountains and had nursed him through every malady born of hard work by using her considerable arsenal of aspirin, warm water, Epsom salts, mineral oil, and turpentine. However, Mrs. McWilliams was dead now, and somehow Epsom salts lose their healing power when the warm water is drawn by the patient rather than the nurse.

Mr. and Mrs. McWilliams had counted Dr. Crane as their "doctor" for many years, but his service to them was limited to assistance in childbirth, broken bones, a rare stitch, and the completion of physical examination forms. Mr. McWilliams sought Dr. Crane's aid on the fourth day and found him officially retired to reminiscing. Mr. McWilliams called the hospital where his wife had died. The cheerful operator connected him to the 24-HOUR WE-CARE-FOR-YOU NURSE-ON-CALL HOTLINE. An angelic voice breathed vital information over a somber piano concerto:

"Press 1 if you wish to speak to a patient-centered personal health care finance master assistant. Press 2 if you wish to speak to a patient-centered quality service professional. Press 3 if you wish to speak to a patient-centered scheduling expert. Press 4 if you wish to enroll in the New Millennium Health Promotion Program. Press 5 if you would like information on our Golden Years European Marathon Package . . ."

By the time the recording reached "Press 9 if you . . ." Mr. McWilliams was completely befuddled. He hung up and redialed the cheerful operator two more times and two more times he was mindlessly transferred to the NURSE-ON-CALL HOTLINE. He despaired of reaching a nurse by telephone and resolved to set out in his car. He found an opportunity to recall his affliction and his repertoire of curse words as he stubbed his naked wet red toe on the kitchen table.

In the place of the corner grocer on Main and Pine Streets where he used to buy candy bars, milk, and bananas was the new and invigorating facade of the Wellness

Health Promotion Institute. John Castleton, a former co-worker, had told Mr. McWilliams at their last poker party that he was seeing a new doctor for his heart problem at an institute where the old grocer used to be. Mr. McWilliams remembered crusty Larry Tarver asking John Castleton what the difference between a clinic and an institute was, but that conversation had ended in an argument before the matter could be settled, which is not at all an unusual resolution for an innocent question asked among friends at a poker game.

After Mr. McWilliams had cleared his throat, knocked over some pamphlets advertising the Patient-Centered Nurse Hotline, and volunteered to answer the ringing telephone for the "receptionist," the girl with the earring in her half-purple eyebrow looked up from her *Rolling Stone* magazine and shoved a clipboard advertising the New Millennium Health Promotion Program in his general direction. The other eyebrow was shaved, but someone had apparently reconsidered this look and decided to replace the hairless brow with a bold stroke from a permanent marker. She spoke not a word but was able to communicate her disdain for his total lack of protocol. Just beneath the sign that read "No service can be delivered without prior authorization and payment for service is required before prior authorization request can be serviced," was a sign that read "To better serve you, please sign in and complete our Quality Health Care questionnaire."

He sat down among the *People* magazines that were preserved in fashionable plastic covers and answered 127 questions about his various bodily functions, mood, general outlook on life, his dreams and aspirations, and social life. He returned the clipboard to the little window overlooking the one-girl eyebrow fashion show and sat down. The clipboard lay undisturbed for 27 minutes. At 28 minutes it was knocked off the shelf by a plastic truck given flight by a 5-year-old. Mr. McWilliams returned it to the little window and announced to no one in particular that he had completed his questionnaire.

Mr. McWilliams was escorted by a remarkably cheerful and beautiful young nurse to a broom closet disguised as an examination room. She provided him with a large paper towel cut in the shape of a T-shirt and an even larger paper tablecloth. In the fashion of Cinderella, these were to become Mr. McWilliams' gown and drape. He could already feel the nurse's soft caring hands easing his sore toe into a warm bath of Epsom salts. Her abrupt departure from his side burst this bubble of comfort. No sooner had she closed the door than McWilliams overheard a snippy little argument in the hall. An agitated woman's voice complained that she could not possibly complete a patient visit in 7 minutes; it took 15 minutes just to get a decent history from these old timers and another 5 min-

utes to fill out their prescriptions. The nurse's voice replied that the Quality Health Care questionnaire was specifically designed to speed up the history and . . .

Before the nurse completed her defense, the other woman's voice broke into a weird laugh that was both neurotic and manic. The laughter trailed off as if the crazed woman were retreating back into her dungeon. At intervals, Mr. McWilliams could hear doors opening and closing in the hallway and the woman's voice interacting with other voices. The woman in the next room had some type of rash beneath her breasts. Mr. McWilliams felt a bit uneasy eavesdropping on this intimate interchange but even more self-conscious that his story would likely be broadcast to the other broom closets.

Within the hour a woman entered the room. She was Dr. Susan Galbreath. She was the mother of two, an Ivy League graduate, and the sole physician member of the Board of Directors of the Wellness Health Promotion Institute. She wore a peach-colored suit with a button that read, "Ask me about our Golden Years European Marathon Package!" Her impeccable makeup and dress did not hide her weariness or unhappiness. Her beeper sounded the alarm before she had even shut the door, and she disarmed it with a reflexive maneuver. She introduced herself with a polite agitation and began her interrogation.

"Mr. McWilliams, I see that you have trouble urinating, you drink too much, and you have a sedentary lifestyle. You are also depressed." Before she finished her first sentence she began writing on a prescription pad. "I want you to exercise more, eat more fruits and vegetables, stop drinking, and take this pill for your prostate. If that doesn't cheer you up some, we'll start you on an antidepressant. Are you contemplating suicide today?"

"Suicide?"

"Yes, do you have a plan to kill yourself?"

"No, I didn't know I was supposed to have one."

"Do you know what I'm getting at, sir?"

"Well . . . , I hear ya cluckin' but I guess I can't find your nest."

"What? Yes, well . . . right, anyway then, if there are no further questions you may get dressed and see the receptionist about your next appointment."

The receptionist was eating lunch at her desk but she got up to retrieve some patient information for Mr. McWilliams. As he stood at the little window, the woman with the ringed eyebrow announced to the waiting room with dry detachment: "Here's some stuff on depression and large prostates and the number of the 24-HOUR WE-CARE-FOR-YOU SUICIDE HOTLINE. There's a class on obesity that meets at our main office on Tuesday nights. You should call them to get on the waiting list."

One of the older women in the waiting room offered to take Mr. McWilliams home with her and, when he respectfully declined the invitation, she offered in consolation that Jesus loved him. He returned to his car somewhat dazed and had a strange urge to vacuum it out (which he always did after he went through the automatic car wash). His toe was throbbing now. He decided to go to the automatic carwash. Halfway through the wash he noted that he needed to make water.

Mr. McWilliams entered the small bathroom at the carwash and began his ritual to initiate the passing of his water. He was vaguely aware of an older man standing next to him participating in the same ritual. The old man spoke:

"Sure sign of getting older," he quipped, "when you fall asleep 'fore you finish your business."

Both men laughed, then Mr. McWilliams looked up to find ol' Dr. Crane standing beside him. They walked out together and Dr. Crane commented on Mr. McWilliams' hobbled gait. Before long, Mr. McWilliams was in the bed of Dr. Crane's pickup truck among the fishing tackle and gardening supplies with his naked red toe propped up on a spare tire. The tackle box was stocked with a nail clipper, cotton balls, and peroxide in preparation for a bad encounter with a fin, hook, or insect. Dr. Crane donned his bifocals and moved Mr. McWilliams' foot over into the sunlight. Mr. McWilliams related his story about his doctor visit earlier in the day.

"That's my daughter," Dr. Crane mused with a smile and a slight shake of his head. "Dr. Susan Galbreath. Family Practitioner. She started helping me around the clinic when she was 14." His head was sideways now with one eyebrow raised trying to bring the ingrown nail into focus. "She was our ingrown nail specialist by the time she was 18. I talked her into going into medicine. Now when I remind her of how we did things in my day, she rolls her eyes like a teenager and impatiently reminds me that those days are gone forever." He put a Bandaid around his work, refastened the clasp on the tackle box and propped the bifocals up on his forehead.

"This isn't our world anymore, Mr. McWilliams. You and me and the other ol' geezers, we survived long enough to watch ourselves become extinct. That wouldn't trouble me any if these young folks seemed a little happier; seems instead like they take two steps forward and three steps back then collapse at the end of the day from all the progress they made."

"So what yer sayin' is that I'm a dinosaur with prostate problems and a ingrown nail, is that it, Doc?" Mr. McWilliams climbed out of the pickup. "I can live with that. How 'bout we spend what's left of this day drownin' a few worms in the river?"