Taking the Risk:

The Other Side of the Story

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In medicine today, risk reduction receives a great deal of attention, and it should. Doctors now have the wherewithal to delay the onset of, minimize the damage from, or in some cases actually prevent a variety of diseases. But do we carry risk reduction too far? Shouldn't individual patients decide for themselves the level of risk they are willing to incur?^{1,2} And in our efforts to comply with current standards of medical practice, should we spend so much time fixing numbers and so little time getting to know and understand the patients who own those numbers?³

Lost in the hoopla surrounding risk reduction is the other side of the story—taking the risk. Unless we comprehend and appreciate that side, we can lose our perspective. Consider the following situations:

When we travel by car, bus, train, or plane, we risk an accident that could seriously injure or even kill us. To reduce or eliminate that risk, should we stop traveling?

When we set goals for ourselves, we risk not achieving them. Should we then set fewer goals, or none at all?

When we care for patients, we necessarily risk diagnostic and therapeutic mistakes, some of which could prove fatal. Must we, therefore, curtail our practice or give it up altogether?

Many people continue to smoke cigarettes, knowing that it clearly puts them at increased risk for lung cancer. Others smoke cigars, mindful that it augments the likelihood of oral cancer. For both groups, smoking is apparently worth the risk.

Many people with heart failure consume salty foods, cognizant that such action can aggravate their condition. For example, when my father's heart failed, he sensed that few pleasures were left for him. One day, he pleaded for herring with sour cream—his favorite dish. With permission from his doctor, I took him to a delicatessen, where that dish did more good for his well-being than any medication ever could. The next day, his congestion worsened, but for him (and for me), his temporary enjoyment was worth the risk.

The bottom line is this: Everyone is constantly at risk for something, medical or otherwise. But that's just part of life—taking the risk.

References

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