

Inhibited

Third Place Prose 2005

I could tell he was uncomfortable. He was squirming in the chair as I introduced myself. I told him, matter-of-factly, that I was a third-year medical student, and that the doctor had asked me to come in and find out what was bothering him. There were a million questions in his eyes when he shook my hand.

“Uh, am I going to see the real doctor too?” he asked uncertainly. He placed just the slightest emphasis on the word “real.”

Of course, I reassured him. I would go out and get Dr. K as soon as I finished asking him some questions. Most patients relaxed visibly when I told them this. For some reason, it didn't seem to make him feel better.

I started off strong. “So, Mr. X...what can we do for you today?”

He seemed to glance quickly to either side, even though we were alone in the room.

“Well, I've had a, uh...” He hesitated.

I was getting a bad feeling. There weren't many medical complaints that could make grown men pause. “Yes?”

“I guess it's like a...” He hesitated again. “Like a pimple.” Another pause. “On my penis.”

Oh. Now I knew why he was squirming. It was bad enough that I wasn't a real doctor. It was even worse that I was young and female. “I see. And how long have you had this...pimple on your...penis?”

“About a week.”

“I see.” I made a note in the chart. “Can you tell me more about it?” Judging from his facial expression, that was the last thing he wanted to do. “Uh, well, it's a little painful sometimes.”

“When is the pain worst?”

He was really squirming now. “Uh, well...I've noticed it most when I'm having sex. With my wife,” he added, rather quickly.

I concentrated very hard on the place when my pen met the paper. “Okay. And is there any discharge or drainage from the pimple on your...penis?” I caught myself hesitating ever so slightly before the last word.

“No.”

“And have you had a fever, or any rash?”

“No fever. No rash.”

“Burning on urination?”

“No.”

“Okay...and have you ever had a problem like this before?”

“Um, I remember having something similar about twenty years ago. In college.”

“And what happened then?”

He shrugged. “It went away.”

“Did you see a doctor at that time?”

“No, I didn’t need to. It went away by itself.”

“Okay. Do you smoke, drink, use any substances?”

“Um, in college. Marijuana.”

“Any injection drugs?”

“Oh, no. Never.”

“Okay. And you’re married.”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Uh, the past thirteen years.”

“And is it a monogamous relationship?” I always hated asking this question. First, it was hard

for me to get my mouth around the word “monogamous.” Second...well, it was pretty selfexplanatory.

He blinked. “As far as I know, yes.”

“Is your wife having any genital problems that you know of?”

“No. I think she would have mentioned them if she had.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t avoid my next question any longer. “Have you ever had reason to suspect you have an STD?”

“No...but I’ve never been tested.”

“And have you had many sexual partners?”

He shifted his weight almost imperceptibly in the chair. “Well, not since I got married, but before that, many.”

“Meaning...” When he didn’t respond to this prompt, I started throwing out numbers.

“Two?

Five? More than five?”

“Uh, more than that. Maybe fifty? Sixty?”

I asked him to clarify: 1-6 or 6-0?

6-0, he replied.

Condom use? I asked.

Inconsistently before he’d married, and rarely since then. More for contraception than for STD protection.

“Okay,” I said. “So let me summarize. You’ve had a slightly painful pimple on your penis for about a week which is giving you problems with intercourse. You had a similar episode twenty years ago, but it went away on its own. Correct?”

His face had turned a bright neon pink, but he nodded valiantly.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I hoped he wasn’t having an aneurysm

He nodded again. “I’m sorry. This is just really embarrassing for me.”

I said, “That’s perfectly understandable. Everything you say to me here will remain confidential, unless it becomes necessary to share it with other members of the healthcare team, or unless you give us specific permission to let others see your medical record.”

My voice was cool and clinical. I felt better as soon as I said the words. They were big enough to hide behind. He nodded with glazed-over eyes. I wasn't sure he'd understood what I'd just said. In fact, I wasn't sure I understood it myself. Confused, I stood up.

"I'll be right back," I said, and escaped.

Dr. K. was standing in the hallway completing a note on another patient's chart. She was a five-foot-two Korean dynamo who ate kim-chi every day with lunch. She also had a witchy temper. I stood by and mentally prepared a 30-second bullet presentation, aware that my neck muscles had tightened and my shoulders had risen to the level of my ears.

Dr. K. finished the note with a stabbing flourish and closed the chart by slapping its front cover. It fell shut. She glanced at me. "Well?"

I was ready. "37-year-old male with a pimple on his penis. Been there for a week. No fevers, chills, dysuria, or penile discharge. Had one previous episode twenty years ago which resolved spontaneously. Married for 13 years, monogamous, wife has no genitourinary complaints. Sporadic condom use. Never been tested for STDs."

I paused for breath, proud beyond words. It was a perfect summary of the patient's problem. Focused, concise, and above all, fast.

Dr. K. said, "What does his penis look like?"

Huh?

"What does his penis look like?" she repeated.

Only then did I realize I'd spoken out loud. I fumbled for words. "I...thought we could look at it together. You know, so he'd only have to...show us once."

Dr. K. seemed to buy this. She rapped her knuckles smartly on the door and didn't wait for a response before marching in. I followed her. She introduced herself briskly. Mr. X rose to his feet and shook her hand.

"Heard you have something on your penis," she said.

He turned pink to the very tips of his ears. "Uh...yes."

With no further preamble, she said, "Let's see it."

His face still a fiery shade of pink, Mr. X pulled his pants down. Dr. K. spent a few moments examining him.

"Is this the spot you're concerned about?"

"Yes."

"Hair follicle." She looked at me. "You see it?"

Oh yes. I did.

"I think that's what it is," she told him. "Just an infected hair shaft. Harmless. You had it exactly right. It's a pimple on your penis."

He looked relieved and embarrassed at the same time.

"You can pull your pants back up," she told him.

I've never seen a pair of pants rise so quickly in my life.

"Is there anything I should do for it?" he asked.

Dr. K. shook her head. “Warm washcloths. If it gets swollen or red, we might give you some antibiotics. But I think we can hold off for now.”

“Okay. Thanks, Doctor.” He looked at me and his face reddened again. “Thank you, too.” Ordinarily, I’d say to patients, “No problem,” or “You’re welcome,” or give them a smile. This time none of those things seemed appropriate, so I just followed Dr. K. out of the room as quickly as possible.

Christine Chen MD, Hunterdon Medical Practice, Family Practice Resident, Flemington, New Jersey