

MY VIEW

Changes in health care aren't always for the Better

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Dave Hyzy, of Tonawanda, welcomes new technology but believes the power of human interaction has been lost.

Fifty years ago, just past my first birthday, my father joined the staff of Kenmore Mercy Hospital as a general practice physician. Over the course of my lifetime, I have witnessed, through my father's eyes, the enormous changes that have occurred in the delivery of medicine.

The introduction of health maintenance organizations, managed care, the proliferation of pharmaceuticals and the amazing advances in surgical techniques have all had a profound effect on medicine. Some were for the better, some were not.

My father was a family doctor, a real-life Marcus Welby. Early in his career, he treated individuals and families from birth to death, often being invited to the weddings of babies he had delivered.

Yes, he made house calls! One of my fondest childhood memories is riding in my father's car with his special black bag always at the ready, right there in the back seat with my brother, Bob, and me. Tending to sick patients in their homes was an important healing tool for my father, one that he made frequent use of. It was a different time.

My father reminded me many times that "medicine was equal parts art and science." That's why they call it "practicing medicine," he would joke. The art was in truly listening to his patients. In our managed care era, where doctors are expected to see a certain number of patients per hour and people are processed assembly-line style, it seems hard to believe, but my father would actually engage his patients in conversation.

This personal touch often provided my father with insight that was crucial in treating his patients. In the drive to control costs, the power of human interaction has been lost, and with it the opportunity to ease patient anxiety and possibly assist in the diagnosis and healing process.

My father hated the idea of socialized medicine as he knew it. Like many physicians of his day, he resented the thought of anyone who was not a physician making medical decisions regarding his patients. With the current dominance of HMOs and the escalation of health care costs, today's physicians are constrained, evaluated and graded by how well they adhere to a formula devised by medical accountants, whose primary interest is saving money, not patient health. In addition to this extreme pressure on physicians to conform to norms, they need to traverse through a maze of insurance organizations, regulations and forms to receive payment.

My father reluctantly retired from medicine due to physical problems 10 years ago, however, it was the frustrating labyrinth of insurance companies and the medical straitjacket imposed by bean counters he truly retired from.

And what has all this controlled and cost-conscious medicine wrought in the 10 years since my father retired and subsequently passed away? Well, we certainly have the most expensive medical system in the world, but independent statistics indicate it is far from the best. Isn't it time that we considered a different approach?

If single-payer insurance reform were combined with a return to the art and compassion of medicine, we might yet again have a medical system that is the envy of the world. I believe this represents our last best chance to return the medical decisions to physicians, return the primacy of patient welfare to patient care and provide physicians the opportunity to treat their patients like people again. Just like the old days!