

Our favorite patients

“How’s my favorite patient doing today?”

“Oh, I’m fine, doctor, thanks for asking.”

“This is awkward, but I wasn’t talking about you, Mrs Smith. I was just wondering if you’d seen her.”

I love to tease my patients in this fashion, likely due to being dropped on my head as an infant. I do the same thing at the hospital, where I greet staff by asking how my favorite such-and-such is and then clarifying that I was talking about someone else. I also enjoy messing with the children in my practice by telling them that they are my favorite but that they shouldn’t tell their sisters or brothers because this is our secret. I am pretty sure this

is the first thing they tell their siblings when they get home. I will even whisper it to each sibling while they are standing side by side. This can backfire—sometimes they mention that I told their siblings the same thing. Not missing a beat I point out that I had no choice because their siblings are so sensitive that if they knew the truth they would be devastated. Only once has a patient queried how I could be sure that she wasn’t the sensitive one. This patient is no longer in my practice because clearly she is too intelligent to be my under my care.

The truth is that we all have our favorite patients. Not that we don’t appreciate most of the people we take care of; it’s just that we connect more closely with certain individuals. Sometimes it’s as simple as resembling a relative (this can also be the reason why we have negative feelings toward some patients) or reminding us of an old friend. For me this connection is linked to an individual’s love of life and positive outlook. I am inspired by these patients’ passion for living life to the fullest and for being thankful for all that they have. Often, despite numerous hardships and obstacles, these people are happy and content. They face each day

with a smile and often go beyond to share this joy with those around them. They have a soft spot in their hearts for those less fortunate and contribute with selfless philanthropy wherever they see an opportunity, so much so that I often learn about their acts of grace from others. They are friendly, self-assured, and don’t sweat the small stuff. When told about a potential life-ending diagnosis they remain calm and often consider the feelings of their family and friends before their own. They accept life’s fickle intricacies and try to make the best of all situations. In brief, these people represent the type of individual I aspire to be. I see the best version of myself reflected in their actions. It is an honor and privilege to serve as their physician.

Therefore, it is difficult and sad when I lose one of my patient mentors. These individuals are more like friends and I mourn their passing deeply. I was reminded of this after a recent death left me feeling melancholic for a few days. I realize that I’ve lost someone special, but I am comforted by the lessons gleaned throughout the years from my encounters with this gracious individual. Rest in peace my friend.

—DRR

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Gone to the dogs?

I love my dog. On my days off I usually plan my activities around dog-friendly destinations. Tolerance for dogs in public places such as hotels, stores, and taxicabs is quite variable, while tolerance for dogs in restaurants, theatres, and on public transit is practically nonexistent. My dog likes to accompany me on pleasant chores like visiting the hardware store. So imagine my anger when we were asked to leave a big-box hardware store because they'd changed their dog-friendly policy, when at the same moment a small Boston terrier, wearing a service-dog jacket, accompanied by his seemingly nondisabled owner, marched into the store unencumbered.

So what are the rules for having a service dog? Service dogs encompass a broad range of animals that have been trained to assist their handlers with physical or psychiatric disabilities. According to a for-profit organization named Service Dogs Canada, in order to qualify as a service dog the dog has to be safe in public and able to obey a number of commands such as "sit," "stop," "heel," and "down." Owners are allowed to home-train their dogs. Service Dogs Canada charges a \$199 fee to obtain a personalized service dog certificate, a wallet card, and a dog vest with service dog patches.

What does this have to do with the practice of medicine? The dog handler must have a disability. Service Dogs Canada allows for a self-declaration, recognizing that "every person in America may have some form of disability." This might be great for traveling in the United States, where the Disabilities Act requires public access for service dogs and the definition of disability is broad. In Canada we are somewhat more suspect of individuals with disabilities without some form of legitimate confirmation. Recent cases of

patients with invisible disabilities such as PTSD being denied canine access to restaurants are a good example of this.

Will regulations for Bill 17 set out clear criteria about the types and severity of disabilities that will qualify an individual for a guide or service dog?

Until recently the only regulation in BC pertaining to service dogs was the Guide Animal Act (RSBC 1996 Chapter 177). This Act defines a person with a disability as "a person who is apparently blind or otherwise disabled and is dependent on a guide animal or white cane." Moreover, the animal has to be used by disabled persons "to avoid hazards or to otherwise compensate for disability." This Act is more in keeping for Seeing Eye dogs but does not legitimize or define canine assistance for many other reasonable circumstances. In response to a number of organizations representing guide and service dog users, government has introduced Bill 17, the Guide Dog or Service Dog Act.

The new Act is more prescriptive of certification of dog training, access to public places, and tenancy, and it proposes the appointment of a registrar of guide dogs and service dogs who will grant certification. This Act allows for yet-to-be-created regulations about the conditions, qualifications, and requirements that must be met by individuals and dogs. The comprehensiveness of these regulations has the potential to be of concern to physicians in that approving a disability that merits the use of a guide or service dog undoubtedly will become our task.

As practising physicians we are challenged enough adjudicating on work limitations imposed by various disabilities while trying to be responsible patient advocates. Will regulations for Bill 17 set out clear criteria about the types and severity of disabilities that will qualify an individual for a guide or service dog?

Bill 17 is a good step toward curbing the current self-certification of service dogs. However, unless physicians have objective information on applicable disabilities to enable us to make a judgment, patients will soon discover which of us like dogs and which of us do not.

—WRV

