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Dinner Party

Each weekend at dinner parties throughout the modern world, nuclear medicine physicians, scientists and technologists meet people involved in other occupations who learn in the course of conversation that their new acquaintance is "in nuclear medicine." Invariably, the question arises: What is nuclear medicine?

I have spent the last 26 years involved in nuclear medicine. I certainly know what nuclear medicine is, does and means. Yet I have difficulty finding the right answer, the succinct reply which communicates the essence of nuclear medicine.

I have responded that "nuclear medicine is a medical specialty, one of 23 specialties recognized in the United States by the American Board of Medical Specialties; a specialty with its own primary board, examination and certifying process, a specialty with a 14,000 member international scientific and educational society." I have told my social companions that "it is a medical specialty which uses radioactive material in the diagnosis, study and treatment of many diseases." At this point, they usually say: "Oh, it is used for cancer." I respond: "Yes, it is used to diagnose, locate and treat tumors, but it can also be used to detect and evaluate other disorders like heart disease, blood clots in the lung, an inflamed gallbladder or a hidden infection." Everyone over the age of 40 is familiar with stress tests. "The thallium stress test is a nuclear medicine procedure." At this point, they have usually had enough. After all, it is only a social encounter, a polite question that did not call for a treatise or course outline.

So, I did not have a chance to tell them about the concept of magic bullets, the wonder of radionuclide production, the exquisite sensitivity of radionuclide imaging to detect increased bone turnover as a marker of trauma or metastases. I did not get to describe the miracle of the ^{99m}Tc generator and monoclonal antibodies, the challenge and technical wizardry involved in producing ¹⁸F-deoxyglucose or the intellectual brilliance of the

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development of ¹²³I-MIBG, ¹¹¹In-pentetreotide or other receptor-specific radiolabeled ligands. I did not tell them of the men and women who work in the middle of the night to produce and deliver those magic bullets, or of those who work day after day in hospitals and offices obtaining images and data. Nor did I describe the wonder of a gamma camera or my delight when watching three-dimensional image acquisition, volume reconstruction and fusion with MRI or CT images. There is never enough time to relate the fascination of watching the brain think, the heart pump, or the marvels of other organ function.

Nuclear medicine is more than a medical specialty. It is a wonder to behold.

Stanley J. Goldsmith, MD, Editor-in-Chief

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