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“Take Your Time, Doctor”

I was once asked by a law firm representing a plaintiff if I would review the nuclear medicine aspects of a potential malpractice case. I agreed, hoping that I would find no basis for the complaint and that my expert advice would likely lead them to drop or settle the case. I received a carton of photocopied records, copies of the scans and several depositions and transcripts of sworn pre-trial questions and answers to and by the principals. I diligently reviewed the material and discussed my opinion of the matter. I thought that, in fact, the interpretation of the nuclear medicine study had not been correct. In the perhaps naive belief that I would help the cause of right and justice, I agreed to continue. I was asked if I would like to see the original material and the digital display of the images that had also been used to interpret the study. I felt I should not ignore any of the data, so I agreed to travel to the distant city.

Since I was scheduled to meet at the attorneys' office early in the morning, I arrived the evening before and went to the hotel where a reservation had been made. It was one of the best hotels in the city. I had dinner in the hotel restaurant, also one of the best. In the morning, I took a taxi to the law firm. I stepped out of the elevator and was immediately enchanted by the surroundings. Inside the plate glass door was a magnificent oriental rug that could have been framed and hung on the wall. The entire area was immaculate and tastefully furnished. An attractive, well-groomed receptionist greeted me, took my coat and offered me coffee, a full-bodied brew served in a porcelain cup and saucer. To the side of the receptionist's desk sat a magnificent vase filled with flowers. Against the wall was an even larger vase and flower arrangement. Copies of the major newspapers were neatly folded on a nearby table. The telephone rang now and then with a muffled buzz, enough to alert the attentive receptionist but not so loud as to interrupt her conversation with another caller or anyone arriving for an appointment.

After coffee and an appropriate review of my intended actions, I was driven to the medical center. It was a typical busy morning in the nuclear medicine department of a large hospital-medical center. The telephones did not stop ringing. The receptionist answered promptly but could barely keep up with the new requests and calls for information and results. Although the waiting room was full and all of the imaging rooms were busy, residents from other services arrived one or two at a time to request emergency V/Q or GI bleeding scans. Another asked: “*How soon can a labeled white blood cell scan be done?*” A nuclear medicine attending physician was trying to arrange the sedation of a pediatric outpatient so that a child could be imaged while still.

I was led to a small room with computer terminals. The hospital administration had agreed that I could view all of the original films and access the digital displays. A technician had been made available to manipulate the computer. Initially, I reviewed the images in black and white. I was asked if I wanted to see anything else. Various display options were available. During the original interpretation, the nuclear physician may have used one or more of them (I could not ask him). I decided to go through the whole palette of display

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options. After exhausting each option, I was asked again if I wanted anything else. Did I want to see them again? "*Take your time, doctor. Take as much time as you want.*" Did I want some more coffee?

While I had formed an opinion about the merits of the case, I was more disturbed about how unfair it all was. Unfair to the patient, to all patients. Unfair to the nuclear physician, to all physicians. Who asks physicians caring for patient after patient in a large medical center if they need more time? Who asks them if they need anything else to help them make a decision. Who attends to their physical comfort so that they can focus on each problem without distraction? Who provides them with a technician with nothing else to do but manipulate the displays over and over? I had never had such luxury in practice in a county hospital, or in a university teaching hospital. "*Take your time, doctor. Take as much time as you want.*" It had never happened to me. The system simply cannot afford it. Nor can it afford enough doctors, assistants or resources.

Ironically, if something goes awry, limitless time and resources appear available. For what purpose? To accuse or punish a physician who was too busy to review a finding repeatedly or to review the dictated note letter by letter to make sure it was accurate and precisely reflected what he thinks and may have to defend someday?

Why are there so many resources available *after* an untoward event? To compensate the possibly wronged patient? Would not *all* the patients benefit if resources spent *after* the problem occurred had been available *before* it occurred? Would not our society benefit more by supporting the overburdened elements of our medical care delivery system instead of providing the negative reinforcement which now exists?

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Editor-in-Chief, *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*
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