

VIEWPOINT

Mystery of where the second thermometer went is solved

Those of us on the Bulletin's staff who have drawn the weekly assignment of writing columns will approach that task in different ways. Usually, though, we have one thing in common. It doesn't matter if it's the soft-focus reflections of life sketched by Candace Cooksey Fulton, the rant du jour boiling over from John Kliebenstein, the cat-juggling potpourri provided by Steve Nash, the insightful observations of Bob Brincefield (I'd be saying that even if he wasn't our leader), or the where-did-that-come-from ramblings spun by yours truly. We all experience a week full of living right here in Bayou city, and something that happens along the way prompts us to share a few thoughts about it.

Almost a full week of my experiences earlier this month was absorbed at Brownwood Regional Medical Center, where I was a patient until a week ago yesterday. Whenever someone of my age goes down – someone with a predisposition to questionable menu choices and whose physical activity is limited to tap-dancing when a story doesn't get in the paper – everybody points first in the direction of cardiology. Fortunately (if there is any good fortune to be found in this), that was not my case. Rather, it was a pulmonary problem. It's a recurring malady I've been battling, but this time it advanced into a particularly nasty version of the chest infections troubling many Brown County residents this winter.

Less than a day into this adventure, when

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the more life-threatening diagnosis had been ruled out, I was moved to a floor where I received the daily cocktail of antibiotic drip my lungs craved. That opened a telemetry room for another patient needing more intensive monitoring. What remained for me was to endure the hurry-up-and-wait healing process while the medicine did its magic. Never has the prayer, "Lord, give me patience, and give it to me now," been more appropriate for me.

The Bulletin has been reporting for several years that Brownwood Regional has repeatedly won national recognition for success in improving and maintaining a top-notch level of quality, courteous and professional medical care. OK, sure, that all sounds well and good, but every industry has a reward system where their folks travel to some lovely resort, eat a steak dinner, pat each other on the back, hand out certificates and go home with a photo and press release. I saw several such honors prominently posted. On my particular floor, certificate after certificate lined the walls attesting to top performance in patient satisfaction surveys. I'm told other wings have those too.

But such awards, recognitions and glowing customer surveys are seen in a different light when it's you who is on the receiving end of those services. And there's no pun

intended, just in case today's readers include the nurse who grinned mischievously when my wife asked why the nurse was carrying a second thermometer. The nurse said if I cared to roll over, she would show us why.

Unless you are a nurse, are related to a nurse or are best friends with a nurse, you may not fully appreciate a nurse's sense of humor. It happens that I do. My late mother-in-law was a registered nurse, and most of her career was spent in an era before the fear of litigation had taken control of U.S. society. My wife and her sister lovingly tell stories about their mother's bizarre stunts, but they always choose their audiences carefully. Let's just say you can't make that stuff up.

Please understand. The tough decisions about types of medication, amounts and timing of doses, the meanings of tests and many other such matters were in the hands — in my case — of Drs. Tamara Cox and Ranjana Nigalye. But after those decisions are made, the heavy lifting then goes to a seemingly endless army of nurses.

Endless? Yes, I know there's a nurse shortage. Brownwood is growing its own as fast as it can while recruiting from all over Texas and throughout the United States, and still more are needed. It's a career that's wide open right now, with an even stronger future. But it takes a special person to accept this professional challenge.

Hopefully, I didn't create too much of a bother while a patient. I know that in nearby rooms, the doctors and nurses were all caring for dozens of illnesses much more serious

than mine. But I never got the sense that anyone's focus was anywhere else but on me.

To those who are suffering, nurses are angels in uniforms. But out of the hospital, they are disguised as spouses, parents and grandparents working 12-hour shifts in order to take care of my sorry situation while their own lives go on too. During some slower moments, several of them paused to share what was happening, good and bad, in their lives. Then there was the nurse who told me that last year, she had the same illness I did, and I should feel fortunate. She was hospitalized for three weeks, not just five days.

I'm sure they face difficulties I can't fathom. Many days, they work shorthanded, just as my dedicated co-workers did while I recovered. On other days, delivery of medical supplies may be late. On some days, everybody on the floor has to have an IV replaced. From a distance, while walking the halls trying to get some air to flow through me once again, I could hear whispers of such frustrations when the nurses had a few moments to talk shop. But never did anything but a cheerful smile and an uplifting word find its way into this patient's room.

It was so good to see them every time they slipped in to offer some medication to ease my discomfort, or even just to bring a pitcher of ice water to quench a thirst. So it almost — *almost* — didn't matter that they all carried a second thermometer with them.