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A Wake-up Call: Before The Scalpel, and After

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One of the repeated themes of this new administration – let’s call them mantras — is personal responsibility. The O team in the White House is dancing to save us as fast as they can, but in a parallel universe, they want us to know in every home, in every workplace, in every language, we all have to do our share.

Your share really isn’t that hard. And you’ll feel better almost as soon as you start. I’m thinking now of simple acts of sanity like lowering your thermostat, using your car less and your bike more, helping out your neighbors, growing some of your own food, and one that might seem daunting, staying fully engaged with your medical care when you get sick.

That’s always a tough one. Some people shift into high gear when it comes to a medical problem — asking questions, exploring alternatives — but many go numb when diagnosed, especially when a surgery is involved, asking everything of our doctors and almost nothing of ourselves.

So how engaged are you in your medical care? Here’s a simple EN/X quiz to help you find out. It might embarrass you at first, but it will empower you later. It’s called Name Your Doctor.

Begin by naming your internist or your family doctor. (Or just name the last doctor you saw.)

If you have a child, name your pediatrician.

And now, final answer, name your anesthesiologist. Take your time. More than 70 million Americans undergo surgical procedures every year. Cut-cut, stitch-stitch. (Keep thinking.) By age 50, the average person has already had at least three surgeries requiring anesthesia.

Pulling a blank?

And that's my point. Very few people can name their anesthesiologist, let alone pronounce what they do correctly.

That's because these highly trained Doctors of Sleep and Comfort tend to operate under the radar, behind the scenes. The surgeons get all the glory and TV series face time, but during your operation, it's the anesthesiologist or anesthesiology provider (often, it's a team) who monitors your heart rate, heart rhythm, breathing, oxygen level, blood pressure, pain level and movement. If things go wrong, and they can, unexpectedly, patients can suffer long-term damage or die.

“As a patient, you may have known your surgeon for weeks, even years. Yet, you probably won't meet your anesthesiologist until the very day of surgery,” writes **Dr. Panchali Dhar in her informative book “Before the Scalpel: What Everyone Should Know About Anesthesia” (www.TellMePress.com).** “You *select* your surgeon, but you are usually *assigned* an anesthesiologist.”

No wonder we don't remember their names. We're usually in a panic when we meet them and they ask their vital questions. The next thing you know, you're in the recovery room, and the anesthesia plan is in full swing, and you're so far out of the loop, you don't even know there was a loop.

And that's why Dr. Dhar's new book is such an important one. It's a wake-up call to all of us, to educate and encourage us to get involved in our own medical care, especially when it comes to talking to our doctors and our anesthesiologists about our “thoughts, concerns, fears and hopes.” What? It's OK to do that . . . ahead of time . . . really ask questions . . . and they won't get mad?

“The A team welcomes your participation in making the anesthetic plan,” writes Dr. Dhar, a board-certified anesthesiologist and assistant professor at New York's Weill Cornell Medical College. Being informed means being empowered, she writes, ending every chapter with a checklist list of important things you should know, or ask about in order to get the best care possible.

Here are a few of her many eye-opening suggestions:

— Discuss the choice of anesthesia *and* anesthesiologist with your doctor ahead of time. Explore all your options.

— Be completely honest about your lifestyle habits: how much liquor you drink, hidden addictions you have, or if you take Viagra, Levitra or Cialis, or any other drug or supplement.

— Have you considered alternative pain relief methods such as relaxation techniques, acupressure or acupuncture?

— Ask if the operating room can be warmed up before you go in for your procedure.

— Ask if your music preference can be played to help you relax.

— Think about your prior experience with anesthesia. Post-op nausea? Claustrophobia with face mask? Sore throat? Difficult intubation? Speak up! Your life may depend on it.

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“Being informed about your medical care means being empowered.” — Dr. Panchali Dhar, in “Before the Scalpel.”

Marilynn Preston — fitness expert, personal trainer and speaker on healthy lifestyle issues — is the creator of Energy Express, the longest-running syndicated fitness column in the country. She welcomes reader questions, which can be sent to MyEnergyExpress@aol.com. To find out more about Preston and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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