

## The Walk-In Patient

By Gary Huffaker, MD

"What brings you in today, Mr Toland?" I asked politely. It was a busy afternoon at the office and I was not really expecting a "walk-in." Not being on call and being very busy with my own schedule, the addition of Mr Toland was not a welcome turn of events.

As I spoke, I sat down on the small rolling physician's chair in room #5 and looked at Mr Toland, trying not to convey my mild annoyance. He was tall, large-boned and balding with an obviously red right eye. His lashes were sticky with secretions, and he seemed to me to be an obvious case of conjunctivitis.

"Well, Doc" he began, "my right eye has been red and painful now for two days." I resisted the impulse to ask any questions and allowed him to continue.

"In the morning, my lids are stuck together and I have to soak my right eye with a warm wet washcloth in order to get my eye open."

He paused.

"Anyone else in your family with a similar problem?" I asked.

"No, but my racquetball partner had a red eye last week. I think his doctor ended up treating him for pinkeye."

"Well," I said. "It sure looks as if you've got the same thing your partner had. I think we can help you."

"Great!" responded Mr Toland.

"Is there anything else I should know about this problem?" I inquired. I had just finished a course in clinician-patient communication and remembered that this is a good question to help elicit the patient's perspective.

Mr Toland hesitated. I reached in the top drawer to pull out my prescription pad, and glanced briefly back at Mr Toland.

"Well, Doc, I guess it isn't important, but, um, well, two months ago today, my father died unexpectedly."

I laid the pad down on my desk quietly and looked directly at Mr Toland's face. His hair was gray but had some blonde streaks, indicating the color it had been in his youth. His manner was hesitant; his eyes looked at me carefully.

"It was tough" he said. "But last night he came back to see me in a dream. He assured me that he was OK and that he didn't want me to worry about him."

Mr Toland brightened.

"That dream really was just what I needed."

I looked at him now in a new light. As he stood to leave, we looked at each other, then hugged.

He thanked me and left with his prescription. For the rest of the day, I felt completely enlivened. Mr Toland and I had unexpectedly become more fully human at a walk-in appointment. ❖



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