

DOCTOR STORIES

By John F. Hall

I gave my oldest granddaughter, Andrea an update on my appointment with my dermatologist in Nashville. I texted her a pre-pandemic picture of me with Dr. Natalie Curcio. She texted me back and wrote, "Great picture, I'm sure your stories about your doctors are great ones as well (assuming you write one about them). I had previously texted Andrea and wrote, "I think you will be amazed at your old An-Father's creativity. I have several friends that encouraged me to do this for posterity. I have nothing from my dad or my grandfather, and that is sad. I'm 75, the same age of my dad when he died. I want you to have & to read my stories after I am gone. That way, you will have those memories and pictures to pass on to your children."



Five years ago, I had only two doctors in my life, my-dentist, Dr. Freeman and my family physician, Dr. Daniel Butler. Then things began to change on April 17, 2015. My wife, Paula and I planned to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary by going out that night to eat at her favorite restaurant, Martha's in Murray. I was in the bathroom and I noticed some blood in my urine. I had some minor back discomfort. It had happened before when I was in the Army. It was due to a kidney infection. We decided to stop by Primary Care to have Dr. Butler give me a prescription to clear up the infection. He had a very heavy patient load that day and I was told to see his physician assistant. As I begin this story about my doctors, my friendship with Dr. Butler is kind of like the friendship that Marshall Dillon had with "Doc" on Gunsmoke. It didn't matter who you were to Doc. If you were hurt, he would heal you. I would thank Dr. Butler for keeping me alive. He would say, "God keeps you alive, I just merely do some tinkering."

Dr. Butler's PA ordered an ultrasound at Primary Care. As soon as the PA saw the results, she immediately took them to Dr. Butler. He stopped what he was doing and he came back with his PA to talk to me. He said, "John, you are not going to the emergency room. You are going to be admitted to the hospital. I have already called them. Go now, you have a kidney stone." Without getting into a discussion if a kidney stone is as painful as childbirth, I would not know. But the pain was becoming unbearable. I was given injections for the pain every four hours. My Army friend, Captain Jason Crisp and family, Loretta, Skyler and Lexie came to visit me. Skyler and Lexie are my surrogate granddaughters. I have a third surrogate granddaughter, Jade Hakes. My other adult grandchildren are Andrea, Heather and John-John.

Dr. Daniel Butler asked Dr. Steven Trevathan, a urologist to treat me. Dr. Trevathan came by my hospital room. He said, "Mr. Hall, I am going to give the kidney stone two days to pass. If it does not move, then I will have to surgically go up and remove it. Do you understand"? I was under the influence of the pain medication, but the pain was increasing. I agreed. Dr. Butler observed something on the ultrasound that he felt needed

to be investigated. He asked Dr. Monte Finch, a gastroenterologist to visit me when that doctor was making his rounds at the Murray—Calloway County hospital.

Dr. Finch came by my hospital room. He had on a crisp, starched, white physician coat. He explained what Dr. Butler was concerned about. I agreed to have a colonoscopy after the kidney stone passed. Dr. Finch began to examine my stomach area and I nearly came out of the hospital bed. It was the pain from the kidney stone and putting any pressure anywhere just intensified the pain.

One can always find a little humor even in painful situations. By the third day, the kidney stone had not passed. Dr. Trevathan came into my hospital room. He had on his surgical scrubs, shoe coverings, and cap. He said, “Mr. Hall, I had scheduled you for surgery now. But the chiller about the operating rooms just exploded and the water shorted out all of the electrical wiring in the operating rooms. I am going to release you and let you go home. I will give you a prescription for the pain. Drink lots of water. Capture the kidney stone in this strainer, if it passes. We will reschedule the surgery once the operating rooms become functional.” Robert Burns is given the credit for the phrase, “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” Such was the case for Dr. Trevathan’s planned surgery on me. The kidney stone passed two days later, praise the Good Lord.

William Shakespeare wrote, “all the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.” The number of doctors that came on the proverbial stage, in the next five years, to treat me, would easily make for an interesting play. But this story, like many of my previous stories, contains stories within stories. I will write about the 23rd and 24th of July, 2020, and then go back for five years. I will interject my observations of the apathy that folks were displaying.

On July 23, 2020, a Thursday, I drove to Nashville with my wife. I had an appointment with my dermatologist, Dr. Natalie Curcio. There is absolutely no doubt or reservation in my mind that Dr. Curcio not only stopped the cancer at my skull, but she literally saved my life. She had to remove the cancerous skin on my forehead, the size of a silver dollar. It left quite a hole. Dr. Curcio is a “Top Doctor,” but she referred me to a plastic surgeon to reconstruct the removed skin. I gave Dr. Curcio a thank you card and a list of my stories that Audrey Lambert put on her web page (ajlambert.com). Audrey encourages me to keep on writing because it is good for the soul and others can read them.

Dr. Curcio is somewhat pessimistic about a viable vaccine being developed this year or next. I don’t agree and I am optimistic about the creative genius of our research scientists. My dad, Charles J. Hall was a research scientist and he was an asset to NASA’s Apollo project to put a man on the moon. Army 4-star General, Gustave Perna, the Commander of the Army’s Material Command, along with Moncef Slaoui are co-leading “Operation Warp Speed.” Together, they are being charged with not only finding a vaccine, but also producing 300 million doses of it by early next year and distributing it across the United States. It may take more than one inoculation for someone my age to receive immunity.

Dr. Curcio recommended a competent plastic surgeon by the name of David Gilpin. I contacted Dr. Gilpin. We coordinated the times so that when Dr. Curcio was finished with her Mohs surgery, my son, John would drive me over to Dr. Gilpin's office to close the wound. When I arrived, Dr. Gilpin said that he would have to do the surgery at Tristar Hospital, just outside the city limits of Nashville. He gave me pre-op medication in his office and my son drove me to the hospital. Dr. Gilpin performed an amazing reconstruction on my forehead without any skin grafts and without leaving any scars. I did take radiation at that hospital once the skin healed. My teeth were not in good condition and the radiation resulted in additional loss of teeth.

After Dr. Butler looked at the MRI results of the spinal stenosis. He recommend that I see a spine surgeon. I decided that if I needed to have spine surgery, that I would have it done at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida. My wife, Paula was at that clinic for treatment of her headaches. She has a rare brain disease called Cadasil. There is no cure or treatment. She also has small cyst floating in her brain that we were concerned might cause her problems. We felt that if she needed brain surgery, that we wanted Dr. Robert E. Wharen, Jr., to perform the surgery as he deals with brain tumors. He told Paula that he did not recommend surgery. He said that as long as the cyst does not block any drainage, it can be ignored. Dr. Wharen was making notes on a pad using a pencil. When Paula told him that she had a stroke and took a medication for a migraine headache at the same time, Dr. Wharen dropped the pencil. He looked at her and said, "I am surprised that medication did not kill you. You will never take that medication again." He prescribed Topamax and another medication for the chronic brain pain caused by the Cadasil disease. While the Clinic was performing tests on Paula, to establish a base line, a vascular surgeon doing fellowship training, came over to talk to me. He said, "Mr. Hall, if one day your wife is still here (not Dead) and is incoherent, get her back down here as soon as you can."

I tried to get an appointment for possible surgery on my spine. I was told that the Clinic has more demand than its ability to provide care. I asked for the name of a spine surgeon that trained at the Mayo Clinic and has a practice in Kentucky or Tennessee. I was told there was only one. His name is Joseph Justus and he is a neurosurgery specialist in Cookeville, Tennessee. He is the only reason why Paula and I traveled to Cookeville. I made an appointment to see Dr. Justus. I provided him with three MRIs of my spine. He told me that my spinal stenosis had not degenerated to the point that I would need surgery. He referred me to John Corey in Nashville. Dr. Corey is an assistant professor at Vanderbilt Hospital and a former Navy doctor. He served several tours with the Marines "on the sands"(Iraq). He gives me the epidural in my spine every four months.

Dr. Mark Lineberry was my cardiologist in Paducah, but he retired. On one occasion when Paula was taking a stress test in Murray, her heart rate went out of control. The PA administering the test could not control it. She called for an ambulance to take Paula to Lourdes Hospital in Paducah. I was following the ambulance, but once it began speeds over 100 miles an hour, I resumed normal speed.

Inside the ambulance, a drama began to unfold. The EMTs were concerned that Paula would Code (die) before they reached the hospital. Dr. Lineberry was still practicing at the time. Our cardiologist in Murray, Dr. William Holman had died. Dr. Lineberry, by radio, told the EMTs to bypass the emergency room and take Paula directly to the intensive care unit (ICU) in the hospital. I had a private conversation with Dr. Lineberry. I told him that we live in the middle of nowhere and I wanted him to keep Paula in the hospital for at least three days. He agreed and that decision keep Paula alive because the heart cath test resulted in two pseudo aneurysms that almost caused her to die.

My rheumatologist is Dr. K.A. Desai in Hopkinsville. The rheumatoid arthritis in my finger joints makes it painful for me to write using a pen. Dr. Desai told me to stop drafting my stories using a pen and purchase a voice recognition software such as "Dragon." Since I use "Notes" in my smartphone, I just use one finger to tap out the letters. I like to sit on my porch swing, weather permitting, and draft stories. The time may come when I may have to use the software. I use two fingers to type on my laptop and then I print out my stories.

My other orthopedic surgeon is Dr. Jeffery Herring in Nashville. He is brilliant. He performed surgery on my right foot that another doctor at Vanderbilt Hospital said that I could not have because of the blood circulation in that foot. Dr. Herring said that was not true. This is a case where a second opinion mattered. Dr. Herring served as the team surgeon for the Tennessee Titans from 1993 to 2003. He performed two surgeries on my right foot. I increased the size of the shoe that I wear and I had specific shoe inserts made. It stopped the pain. But the recovery from the two surgeries was pure torture. I had to have my big toe broken and a screw inserted in that toe. I had to have a six-inch pin in the toe next to the big toe as the joint in that toe had completely separated. Dr. Jeffery wants to do a third surgery that entails breaking four toes on the same right foot and inserting six-inch pins in those toes. He said that I may lose the use of those toes if I did not have the third surgery. At the age of 75, my running days are over. I can walk and I can tolerate pain, so I declined to have the third surgery.

I have several more doctor stories from Dr. George Thomas, Dr. Mark Crawford and Dr. Scott Winkler. But the value in this story is what Paula and I observed in Nashville before my office visit with Dr. Curcio and what I observed when I went to get a personal pizza for Paula in Cadiz, Kentucky. In Nashville, Paula and I went to McDonald's for a carry out order. We had on our face masks and half the people coming into that restaurant were not wearing masks. I drove a half block from Dr. Curcio's office and went into a multi-story parking garage to eat our lunch away from the hot sun. I keep hand wipes and paper towels in the car and we cleaned our hands before we ate our lunch. I watched as the customers went into the department store across from where we were parked. Paula was not feeling well and did not want to shop while I was in Dr. Curcio's office. The customers had to open two doors to go into the store. Most had their masks on. Only one customer used her elbow to tap the handicap automatic door opener to go into the store. Many customers waited until they were inside the store to put on their face masks.

Rather than just touching the elastic to go over their ears, the customers were touching their face as they were adjusting their face masks. So any virus that might have been on the two door handles would be transferred to the mask and to their face. The CDC has not issued specific recommendations for the public regarding eye protection. However, the CDC recommends eye protection for healthcare workers to prevent transmission to the eyes via air droplets. I have a pair of fully clear safety glasses, they just look like neat eye glasses. I intend to start using them when going into department stores. This is not my recommendation. Dr. Anthony Fauci, at the age of 80, is the nation's top infectious disease expert. He just recommends that in addition to face masks, that if a person has goggles, they should wear them. The rationale is that the virus can enter the body through mucus tissue in the nose, mouth or eyes. But I think the horse was already out of the barn and Dr. Fauci's eye protection recommendation was not given the proper attention it deserves.

In 2004, I conducted an Army security analysis of the Tripler Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. I was opening door after door, in building after building. I picked up an eye infection, in one eye. The Army physician treating me said I picked it up possibly from a contaminated door knob. The CDC recommends the use of single-use tissues on door knobs, gas pump handles, etc. But even that is not getting the attention it deserves. I had to drive into Cadiz to pick up a medication for Paula. She asked if I would get a carry out personal pizza. This was Friday, July 24, 2020. I put on my mask before I went into the restaurant. There were seven people ordering ahead of me. They were not wearing masks and were not social distancing. Two of the young women gave a hug to person they had not seen in awhile. I spent over 20 minutes standing there waiting to place my order. Three people came in after me and they were not wearing a mask. Apathy is one sad reason why the virus continues to be spread.

Edgar A. Guest wrote the poem, "The Family Doctor." These are his words, "I've tried the high-toned specialists, who doctor folks today; I've heard the throat man whisper 'Come on let us spray;' I've sat in fancy offices and waited long my turn, and paid for fifteen minutes what it took all week to earn; and while these scientific men are kindly, one and all, I miss the good old. doctor that my mother use to call."

Dr. Butler is the good old doctor that my mother would have called. I don't remember ever writing a poem as I make no claim to be a poet. But the following is the best that I can do: "Luck has been with me because Doctor Daniel Butler will always take my call. He gives me more than 15 minutes if I need it, and let that be known to one and all. For he is more than a doctor, he is also my dear friend. And if this was 100 years ago, I'd have to pay him for his services with several of my best hens."

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
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