

No One is an Island:

Meaningful Second Opinions

July 1, 2015



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By David Johnson, CEO



A good friend (let's call him John Donne) in his mid-fifties recently wrote describing his treatment for early-stage prostate cancer. He titled his message "Cure vs. Treatment".

John's journey starts terribly, but ends well. Lessons abound.

Before sharing John's story, it's helpful to revisit the Hippocratic Oath (modern version). Among its other covenants, the Oath stresses the following:

- Holistic care: physicians treat "sick human beings" not "fever charts" nor "cancerous growths"
- Appropriate care: avoid "overtreatment" and "therapeutic nihilism"
- Knowledge sharing and consultation
- Self-awareness, empathy and humility: understand personal limitations
- Prevention "is preferable to cure"

Consider the Hippocratic Oath while reading John's letter.

David,

Love your commentaries!

I was recently and awkwardly introduced to the dark side of healthcare, as I just finished external beam radiation and Brachytherapy for early prostate cancer.

What I came across was so evil and scary (across the board) – the level of greed and ethical corruption in conventional cancer care is unfathomable.

My local doc checked my PSA and referred me with a "just over the threshold score" to a urologist within his system. When I asked for another opinion, there was an eight-week wait for an appointment.

The local yokel urologist did a biopsy, found two of eighteen samples malignant and observed the following:

1. *Surgery was really my only option. He dismissed radiation with a roll of the eyes. Seriously, no words, just an eyeroll. And said that his new Da Vinci (branded robot) was the very coolest thing. He'd done almost a hundred procedures in his career "which might as well be a million."*

2. *Questioned how much I valued my sexual function because "there are a lot of nerves that might accidentally get severed"; and*
3. *I stood a really good chance of living ten years longer.*

I just smiled and vowed never to see his face again. I know an "aw shucks" huckster when I see one.

I called my scientist brother. He referred me to a prostate cancer specialist, who stopped counting at five thousand procedures. My good friend, a retired banker, had just done a nationwide search for a similar condition and recommended the same specialist.

The specialist concluded I had two options: surgery (not robotic, which is considered experimental); or Brachytherapy, the seed implants. I was not a good candidate for surgery, since the three tumors were in difficult places and would require retreatment within five years.

The specialist further noted that Brachytherapy has a ninety-seven percent cure rate with a two percent chance of incontinence and near-zero chance of impotence. He recommended five weeks external beam radiation combined with Brachytherapy. I just finished the treatments with no side effects.

I asked him why other docs prescribe high-risk treatments when less risky, more curative therapies exist. He said that each case is very different depending on the patient's age, health and tumor characteristics.

He would not throw another physician under the bus. What I see, however, is a guy in a hospital system paying for his Da Vinci machine and his Mercedes. With his prescribed treatment, his health system could bill up to twenty procedures instead of just one or two. If side effects emerged from my bad decision (getting just one treatment opinion from the local yokel), so much the better for the health system.

I have never seen such a corruption of "sacrosanct trust." You can throw out the "Hypocritical Oath"!

The AMA won't adjudicate protocols because their statistical methodology allows for broad interpretations that keep the big health systems' "treatment machines" rolling.

That "doctors" are free to market their treatments as "best practice" is such a sham. It's sad my local doctor could not warn me about the medical circus I was entering, since he was part of that system too.

My father-in-law got caught in this mess a few years ago and died of liver cancer that started in the prostate. He trusted his local-yokel urologist to remove all the cancerous tumors. The last two years of his life were unbearable due to chemo treatments. Still, his hospital billed his insurance early and often.

It is really sad that that a local yokel feels free to weigh my life and well-being against his need to pay off overhead and "feed" his parent health system through misdiagnosis and overtreatment of well-insured individuals.

I know I am preaching to the choir, but this is a real conspiracy that touches average people and they suffer.

John

Where to begin? The Hippocratic Oath is a good place. Grounded in ancient Greek philosophy, it mandates patient-centered care, humility and consultation. There is no evidence of these behaviors in John's story until he connects with the national specialist.

John is a highly educated and very capable professional with an expansive network. These attributes enabled him to resist and overcome health system pressure for expensive, inappropriate and likely harmful treatment. Good for him.

It's his last sentence, however, that haunts me. Don't all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, deserve meaningful second opinions when confronting scary medical diagnoses?

The revenue-first mindset that governs U.S. medicine resists external interventions. It drives high volumes of profitable procedures through aligned facilities. As John's story demonstrates, patient needs are too often a secondary consideration.

Emerging Market Solutions

Competitive markets respond to customer needs by developing solution-oriented products and services. There is a huge unmet need for meaningful second opinions.

Not surprisingly, the marketplace is responding. Multiple "second-opinion" companies are emerging. Their specialists review diagnoses and recommend treatment regimens. They suggest adjustments as warranted.

Grand Rounds and Pinnacle Care are industry leaders in providing independent second opinions. Two-thirds of Grand Rounds' case reviews recommend different treatment regimens. Two-thirds! In the vast majority of cases, their experts prescribe less invasive therapies. The result is better, more compassionate and more cost-effective care.

The current customers for second-opinion companies are individuals with means and self-insured employers. Companies pay small per-member-per-month fees to cover all employees.

In consumer-driven reform, the market for independent second opinions will expand to counteract healthcare's information asymmetry (John's "local-yokel" problem). Enlightened payors and providers will offer services to engaged customers and win their loyalty.

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I chose my friend's pseudonym carefully.

John Donne is the best-known of England's seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. The following paragraph in Donne's eloquent Meditation #17 (written in 1623) inspired the title for Ernest Hemingway's best-selling novel For

Whom the Bell Tolls and Simon and Garfunkel's 1965 hit song, "I am a Rock".

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

When American medicine misdiagnoses and overtreats, it diminishes consumers' confidence in the entire healthcare system. The American people deserve better. Independent, expert second opinions conducted in full consultation with patient customers should become the standard of care. Consumer-driven reform demands better healthcare services and the market is responding.

We all are in this together.