

Lessons from the ER

December 2006

A teenage boy was recently taken to the emergency room with severe chest pains. His parents were naturally worried, for they had never seen him in this kind of distress. Some lessons they learned during their trip to the ER:

Triage

The ER was *packed* with children: one boy had a severely lacerated finger; babies were sick and in respiratory distress. But due to the type of distress the teenager was having, he was given high priority and taken to a room within minutes. This process is called “triage,” an evaluation that places higher priority patients before those with lesser ailments.

It occurred to the father that perhaps triage should be practiced in normal life. Seems that our lives become cluttered with what seem to be critical issues – like the ER waiting room – but on further review are not that important. What *really* needs attention in our lives? Time is precious and limited.

The Attending Doctor

Tests were quickly done on the teenager which ruled out heart trouble. After a few other routine exams, the ER doctor reassured the boy that he had no serious illness. He said the pain was real and could be severe, but it was being caused by ... growing pains. Cartilage was stretching and inflammation was mimicking symptoms of heart distress.

How comforting it was to the young patient and to his anxious parents to have an attending doctor who had seen, by his own estimation, thousands of similar cases. This experience enabled him to quickly and accurately rule out serious problems. But what really impressed the parents was his demeanor: he did not talk down, get irritated or seem impatient. He could see their concern and gave calm reassurance that, regardless of the degree of pain, their son’s condition was relatively minor. Again, the father thought of the doctor’s qualities applied to spiritual matters. How valuable are wisdom, experience, calmness in the midst of high emotion and crisis.

The Magnifying Force of Fear

The young teenage patient was naturally scared by any thought that he was seriously sick. His fear only intensified the pain, and as the waves of inflammation came and went, his body stiffened and shook in reaction. But given the doctor’s reassurance, he began to look at the pain in a different way. He relaxed and calmly endured the discomfort.

Again, the father thought how this mirrors real life. When the disciples thought their boat was sinking, they cried out, “*Lord, save us! We are perishing!*” But they weren’t, actually. And Jesus answered, “*Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?*” (Mt 8:25-26). Later, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they thought they were seeing a ghost: “*And they cried out for fear.*” And Jesus replied, “*Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid*” (Mt 14:26-27). Fear exaggerates; fear discounts the power of God; fear imagines things that aren’t really there; fear keep us from doing the things that need to be done. Trust and confidence, well-placed in the proper object, is the antidote for fear.

Oh, by the way, Andrew will be fine.