



Learning a golden rule... the hard way

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The hospital beeper emitted three short, sharp beeps. 'Ambulance green' said the charge nurse who was helping me suture the wound of a 3 year old girl. We both knew the procedure. I ripped off my gloves and ran into the ambulance bay.

In this large regional centre, when mobile intensive care ambulance services were still a capital city luxury, the hospital admitting officer would be whisked to emergency scenes outside the hospital that needed on site medical assistance. The characteristic page told the attending officer to drop everything, pick up the emergency equipment, sprint to a predetermined spot, and wait for transport to the scene.

Outside the sky was clearing quickly after some solid Sunday showers, and as I stared at the Christmas lights that had just been put up to decorate the ambulance bay I was thinking, 'What is it? Drowning? Heart attack?' An ambulance stationwagon pulled up and I jumped in. I saw a defibrillator on the back seat.

'Lightning strike' said the ambulance officer.

As we raced through the wet streets, he explained that a 25 year old man had been struck by lightning at a work Christmas picnic. All I could think was that 'the ground around the patient has to be dry if I'm going to use the defibrillator'.

We approached the park; an ambulance was parked under some large elm trees. Fifty or so people were milling about a blanket covered form. A young man spotted me and called out, 'The doctor's here. It'll be all right now'. I examined the victim: mid 20s, burn marks on his neck beneath a metal chain,

burn marks on his wrist from his metal watch. No heart beat, not breathing, pupils fixed and dilated. He was dead.

'How is he, doc?' asked the young man who turned out to be the victim's best mate.

What was I to say? I had always been taught to be honest to patients and their families and not to hide anything. So, in my kindest and most sympathetic voice, I said very gently, 'I'm sorry to say this, but I'm afraid your friend is dead'.

'What?' he bellowed, 'Is that all?' I knew what he meant. In that moment he had uttered an existential statement on how quickly life can leave us; but it was the wrong place to have to deal with such a revelation. In the style of the famous painting 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch, the poor man put both palms to the side of his face and turned to his work mates howling, 'He's dead'. In unison, his workmates took on the same pose. Men, women and children all ran around howling and crying. It took us half an hour to calm everyone down.

The 'golden rule'

With hindsight and experience, the 'golden rule' seems clear: where appropriate, no-one ever dies at the scene of an emergency.

Despite being responsible for the emergency medical management of an entire regional city, I had never been taught about disaster scene management. Ironically, the other people at the scene were lucky that day. So was I. The storm was over. What if the danger had not passed? How could we have evacuated everyone safely after I had panicked them? Even though we were all safe, what about the unnecessary emotional

trauma caused at the scene by my inopportune disclosure?

Postmortem examination revealed extensive lightning related injuries that almost certainly would have killed the poor chap instantly. I could not have altered his fate. However, I have often been troubled by the thought that the situation could have been much better managed if only I had known that golden rule. And none of my colleagues ever spoke to me about how I felt that day. Is this another golden rule we are yet to learn?

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