

Multidisciplinary Rounds

James L. Glazer, MD

Rita, an aged patient with difficulty breathing, lay before me in a stretcher. Despite the warm June weather, she was bundled in an enormous threadbare green sweater and had the covers tucked tightly under her chin. She glared out at me from her perch when I entered the room. “Who the hell are you?” she demanded, her bird-like features becoming even sharper. A tuft of unruly grey hair stood at attention like a headdress as she turned to follow my progress into the room.

I swallowed a smile. “I’m Dr. Glazer,” I introduced myself. “I am here to take care of you and to help find you a bed in our hospital tonight.” Her glare softened a bit. “You took your time getting here, didn’t you?” she asked. “I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

Our pleasantries exchanged, Rita and I got down to business. She had been having trouble breathing for days. Her doctor told her to go to the ED when her inhalers no longer were providing her relief. “I gave that woman a piece of my mind, let me tell you. She knows very well that I can’t just leave my cats alone. They are very sensitive creatures, you know.” My eyebrow shot up at the mental image that she conjured: Rita telling off a swarming mob of cats. I wrestled my facial features down to half-mast and attempted a concerned nod. Rita went on, describing her worsening symptoms and how she eventually arrived in the hospital.

“I think you should stay with us for a little while, at least until your emphysema gets under control,” I told Rita after having examined her. “But first, why don’t you tell me a little bit about your medical history.” Rita cataloged her medications, her history of operations, and her current medical conditions. “I have high blood pressure, I’ve had a mini-stroke, and, of course, I’ve got the skirmin’ dirmin.” My pen stopped cold. I looked up. “The skirmin’ dirmin?” I asked. It was late. I probably had misheard. “Yes! The skirmin’ dirmin. Haven’t you heard of it before?” I shook my head hopelessly, bracing myself for what would inevitably come next. Her voice rose and her face became suspicious again. “Young doctors these days. They don’t know about anything. Are you even old enough to be a doctor?” She sniffed impatiently as I watched, helpless. “Well, you’ll just have to look it up in your books.”

I retreated to the charting area, where a group of nurses and doctors were working. “The skirmin’ dirmin?” one asked as I described my encounter. “Could

she be psychotic? Maybe she meant ‘screaming demons,’” a nurse volunteered. She worked weekends on the psychiatric ward. “How about ‘squirmin’ vermin?” another nurse added. “My kids just had to be treated for lice. Those things are awful!” she shuddered. “It had to be ‘scalding diarrhea,’ quipped a gastroenterologist as he leaned over admission papers for a patient with a bleeding ulcer. The ED attending cuffed him on the back of the head. “No, morons. Clearly she was talking about ‘scammin’ doctors. She’s complaining about the health care delivery system.” “Great,” I said, sarcastically. “Thanks for all the help, everyone. I’m just going to have to ask her again.” “You’d better take these with you,” intoned the nurse with the psychiatric theory as I passed. She held out the involuntary commitment forms to me as I headed back toward Rita’s room.

“Did you figure it out?” Rita demanded as she saw me. “Did your friends help you?” “No,” I admitted. “I don’t think they helped me at all.” “I thought everyone knew about this stuff,” she said, bringing her hands out from under the covers and looking at them with new admiration. Her skin was white and smooth and her fingers were contracted into claws. “Oh!” I exclaimed with relief. “You have scleroderma!” I shuffled the commitment forms discreetly to the back of my papers. “Yep, that’s what I’ve been saying all along. Skirmin’ dirmin,” Rita said smugly as her hands retreated under the covers.

Three days later, I passed an old station wagon idling by the entrance to the hospital. Inside, at least 30 cats jumped over seats and scaled the windows. An older woman sat at the driver’s seat peacefully smoking a cigarette, seemingly oblivious to the melee around her. Her bumper sticker proclaimed “Back Off!” The elevator doors in the lobby opened to reveal Rita in a wheelchair, looking much better but still bundled up. I broke into a smile of recognition. “Going home today?” I asked. She glared at me. “Read your books!” she said, and then shook her fist at me for emphasis. Rita rolled off, back to her waiting sister and her cats, leaving me to contemplate that, no matter how far removed I become from medical school, I will always have more to learn about good communication skills.

Dr. Glazer is assistant director, Maine Medical Center, Division of Sports Medicine, Portland, ME.