

A Rainy Night in Georgia

On the Ninth Floor

It was the second month of my third and final residency year. I was the senior resident assigned to the inpatient medicine service at a large university hospital in the deep South. Believing I was indestructible and able to handle anything medically (third-year know-it-all syndrome), I volunteered to cover call time for a fellow resident. Although it would be my second day in a row of call time, I nevertheless felt that I could handle the service efficiently. After all, being sleep deprived had become a way of life. Secretly, I pondered the idea of running home for a few minutes, sometime during the night, to change clothes and freshen up. This plan seemed perfectly feasible, because I lived just a few blocks away; nobody would be the wiser, as long as things remained quiet on my shift.

I reported to the emergency department at 1 AM to admit an elderly woman whom I had examined before; it was her 16th admission to our hospital. I diligently questioned her and her daughter and scribbled notes pertaining to the patient's current symptoms and her overall state of health (even though I was thoroughly familiar with her medical history from previous admissions).

After completing the admission, I decided to take a chance and go home for a few minutes to change clothes. It began to drizzle as I parked my van behind my house. As soon as I entered my house, my beeper went off. The nurses on the 9th floor, where the patient had been admitted, reported that her status was deteriorating. Not revealing my whereabouts, I ordered some oxygen and laboratory tests and said I'd be there in a few minutes. As I rushed to change clothes, I heard the booming sound of thunder. The rain increased to a heavy downpour. After changing clothes, I searched for an umbrella before I ventured into the dark, wet night. My beeper again cried. A nervous

voice reported that the patient was having further difficulty breathing and said, "We need you to come here immediately!" Making a mad dash to the van (without an umbrella), I was drenched by the heavy rain. To make matters worse, my tires were stuck in the thick southern mud in my backyard. I became increasingly anxious, and my heart began to pound as my beeper again sounded. I frantically attempted to rock the van back and forth to free my tires from their muddy captor. My anxiety turned to panic when my beeper once again reminded me of my glaring absence from the medical emergency at hand. Mud sprayed the house as I floored the gas in desperation. My panic slowly subsided as the mud reluctantly released its firm grasp and the van inched forward.

Dripping and muddy, I ran up 9 flights of stairs to the patient's room, avoiding the potentially long wait for the elevator. The nurses stared at me, disbelieving my inappropriate appearance. While assessing the patient's condition, I dripped water and streaked mud on the floor. Within the next few minutes, her heart monitor showed ventricular fibrillation. A code was called, and prompt intervention was initiated. By the grace of God, she was successfully resuscitated and transferred to the intensive care unit. Shaken by the experience, I pondered the potential gravity of the situation. If I had been just a few more minutes late, the patient might have died. I also would have had to look for a new residency.

From that day on, I have never left the hospital while on call. Every time I hear the old Brook Benton song, "Rainy Night in Georgia," I get a cold chill down my spine.

—**Brian J. Downs, DO**
Valencia, CA

Copyright 2002 by Turner White Communications Inc., Wayne, PA. All rights reserved.