

COMMENTARY

In other words

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Goodness and courage come in a lot of forms, and sometimes they come rough. Funny, rough, irreverent, unrepentant, even ribald. Any emergency-room doctor or nurse will tell you that, or any hard-bitten savior of a medic following a rifle platoon.

It's part of the paradoxical equation that defines compassion among those who not only feel for the victim — say the compassion shown in a voting booth — but who actually get bloody trying to help the poor bastard, one way or another: The bloodier it gets, the earthier and sharper they get.

If you spend years working with people who quit you by failing to breathe when you want them to, you develop a certain bluntness, an unequivocal mannerism.

This is a form of etiquette — the etiquette of the truth — and it offends some people, usually the kind who know which forks or glasses to use for what courses at the soiree served on white linen, where nobody bleeds or cries or hacks up bile or dies.

Dr. Bob Schwartz is such a medic, the one without country club manners. He's just trying to save somebody. He's the kind who lives always in memento mori, with an awareness of death among the living (as distinguished, say, from an awareness of death among the already dead, like a medical examiner, or death on the books which may leak numbers but never bleed, like a bureaucrat who runs a big health depart-

ment, or the U.S. Department of Defense, for example). Since 1994, Schwartz has headed the AIDS Treatment Center in Lee County, a non-profit organization that now has about 650 patients, and the distinction of saving lives on only a little trickle of money, in part from hard-won federal grants.

People sometimes comment on his manners. "Dr. Schwartz is a difficult person to work with," says Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department, who reported her opinion to the local daily newspaper in December. The reporter herself called him "gregarious — and somewhat abrasive," in print. Boy howdy.

Hartner noted that Schwartz's plan to put area AIDS clinics under one roof probably wouldn't happen — even though health departments in other counties do it, because it saves money, focuses talent and dollars, and thus probably saves lives, or at least reduces patient pain. But Schwartz has bad manners, apparently, which must be more important to some people than the deeply ill — he tells it like it is. Probably belches, too, especially at dinner parties in the presence of the comfortable and oblivious.

For the last couple of years, dollars have been so scarce that Schwartz has turned down any personal salary whatsoever from his non-profit Center — only so that his patients, many of them threadbare by all contemporary standards, can get the county-required tests that will allow them to receive the newest drugs from a federal AIDS program that will keep them alive, or at least keep them functional while they're alive.

In other words, he's helped pay for the AIDS Center out of his own pocket, putting

his money where his mouth and heart are.

He isn't starving; his wife, Dr. Eileen Schwartz, is a respected neurologist, and she gets paid. She also professes that her husband is doing what people used to call, without a cynical chuckle, Good Work.

In other words, she doesn't demand that he add to the family larder, or help their two daughters and families, by insisting on getting paid for a little thing like helping the poor and terminally ill.

But that's not the point, nor is it fair or even decent. Why should 600,000 county residents let Dr. Schwartz and a few others like him shoulder the problem mostly alone?

And it's especially not the point when the AIDS Treatment Center went along with the Lee County Health Department mandate to pay for the three medical tests required of each patient to get drugs from the federal program (administered by the Health Department), nearly bankrupting the Center.

In other words, the tests qualify patients for the federal drugs, which are issued by the health department. Whether or not these costly tests are needed, is arguable. "Each day has been a moral test for us," Schwartz says. "Do we drop the patient or eat the cost?"

Schwartz never drops patients, anymore than a combat medic.

But suddenly, we learn, the Health Department was and is supposed to foot that bill. Which amounted to about \$73,000 in 18 months, and extends back much farther in time than that, so far uncounted.

In other words, local government health officials hoodwinked the AIDS Treatment Center, and shucked off that mistake like a set of muddy underwear. Perhaps they were thinking of manners, when they should have been thinking of stricken men and women.

Dr. Hartner admitted her department's

failure a couple of weeks ago with about as much apology as a hit-and-run driver looking in the rear view mirror.

"I could have asked the question (about whether the Health Department should pay) years ago, and I didn't, but I did not see a problem being voiced by either organization," she told the local daily. In other words, if you sideswipe somebody and he doesn't complain because he's too unconscious to know it, don't worry about it. If you feed the orphans gruel at a starvation rate for years, and they don't ask for more — even though you have plenty in your pot — it's not your fault. It's their fault for not realizing you had a pot-full all along.

The other organization, the McGregor Clinic, also helps AIDS patients, and lost money, too, because of the Health Department oversight. But its leaders apparently have better manners; they don't complain as rudely as Dr. Schwartz has been complaining, or belch at the table if the gruel's sour and poorly portioned.

Dr. Hartner, in this case, says her budget is too limited to pay the AIDS Center the money the Health Department clearly owes. Nor does she sound particularly interested in finding a way to change that.

In other words, she's forgotten part of the Hippocratic oath stretched filament thin like a thread of compassion, down through the generations of doctors who aim to help:

"Into whatever houses I enter, I will go into them for the benefit of the sick, and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption...I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous."

In other words, I'll do everything I can to help, even if some other helper has bad manners. ■



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