

## Testing, Testing, Testing – When Will the Madness Stop?

LEONARD MERMEL, DO, SCM

**I**F YOU VENTURED UPON MY FATHER, his wrinkleless face and sharp wit, you'd think he's doing well for a man of 70 or so. He is 90. He was liberated from Buchenwald concentration camp on April 4, 1945, contracted meningitis shortly thereafter, and was one of the fortunate few to receive life-saving intravenous penicillin. He walks on his treadmill 45 minutes each morning and then briskly completes the jumbo word puzzle in the

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daily paper. He can converse in 8 languages, chants innumerable biblical psalms by memory, plays bridge twice weekly and he still goes to work every Friday.

Recently, my father called to tell me that he had his yearly cardiology appointment. The cardiologist performed a carotid ultrasound and my father was later called by the physician's office with a message that the cardiologist needed to talk with him about the findings. My father is stoic but I could discern some angst in his voice. I told him that a few years ago I had spoken with his cardiologist and requested that he not do any more carotid ultrasounds on my asymptomatic father.

I called the cardiologist. He told me that my father had some unilateral stenosis, worse than in the past, and he was planning on a CT angiogram or MRI with gadolinium. I reminded him that my father is 90, he has not a hint of symptoms, he is medicated (aspirin and Plavix), and his creatinine is

elevated. I said that he'd likely put him into renal failure if he proceeded and I reminded him that a few years ago I had requested that he not do any more carotid ultrasounds on my father. He said OK, he'd skip additional diagnostic tests and send my father to a very good vascular surgeon near his California home. I said no, please don't do that. He has no symptoms and my memory is stained with the recollection of the elderly father of my dearest friend who had a stroke and died after he had an endarterectomy some years ago. As a result of this conversation, the physician said he would call my father and tell him not to worry.

My father called a few days later, after the cardiologist had called and told him that he's 'between a rock and a hard place.' The physician told him that he has carotid artery blockage and poor kidney function so he can't get further studies such as a special CT scan or MRI. I was upset with the less than empathic explanation. I then told my father that it took 90 years to develop some blockage in his carotid artery, so in another 90 years or so we may have to deal with it. That brought him some solace.

My father then told me that he had seen his internist in the interim and he agreed with my conclusions. He had ordered some lab work on my father and the results would be faxed to me. The following week, scanning down the faxed page, was a PSA result. A couple of years earlier, I'd requested that the internist discontinue PSA testing on my aging father.

One might wonder if the most fundamental aspects of medicine have been replaced by an assembly line of testing, devoid of evidence, blind to the unique characteristics that we each possess.

The future of medicine is grim unless we can encourage its practitioners to uphold the values that drove each of us to become physicians and to withstand the urge to do more, when doing less is in the best interest of our patients.

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## Quotes: Rx for life

**"Medicine is the art of engagement with the human condition rather than with the disease."**

— Bernard Lown, MD  
Nobel Peace Prize recipient, professor of cardiology emeritus at the Harvard School of Public Health; author: *The Lost Art of Healing*

**Submitted by:** Barbara H. Roberts, MD, FACC, Director, the Women's Cardiac Center at The Miriam Hospital

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