



It Could Happen

The year is 2016. In the suburban office of Dr. Vera Caring and her aging associate, Dr. Barry Tired, it's Wednesday afternoon, the end of a particularly difficult week.

"Well, Barry, it's late, I'm bushed, let's call it a day," she says rubbing her bloodshot eyes, "I just spent two hours on interactive video, teleplanning with the treatment board at VirtualDent...they're a tough group to sell. I mean I had it all there — intraoral camera shots, the strep DNA studies, neutrophil function tests, the enamel biopsies, the whole enchilada — and they still were hesitant to approve the treatment plans I submitted. I had the dentist convinced, but the actuarial and social worker were a couple of tough nuts to crack. Oh well..."

Dr. Tired looks up from the cold fusion laser unit he is tinkering with and mutters, "It's not like the old days, Vera," and goes back to his work.

Dr. Caring nods in agreement, sighs and stares longingly for a second out the window, until the loud crack of a spark brings her back, "Geez, Barry, that scared me. Why are you fiddling with that thing anyway...it has self-repair software built in."

"Oh, just something I enjoy...like dentistry in the old days."

After a few moments of silence, Dr. Caring pours herself a cup of herbal anti-oxidant tea and takes a seat across from her associate.

"Barry, tell me again what it was like in the old days...before managed care."

He looks up, smiles, and says quietly, "Sure, Vera."

Putting down his tools, Dr. Tired asks, "Well, let's see...how far back should I begin this time? How about when we stopped needing patient consent for care and the HMOs started making all the calls?"

"Back further," replies his colleague.

"How about when the health care industry closed the law schools under tort reform?"

"No, back further."

"When you didn't need to do veterinary dentistry on the side to pay the bills?"

"Earlier!"

"Before dental assistants could do independent practice and retailers put plasma banks, manicurists, fitness centers, cosmetic dentistry, and tattoo artists together in those body-malls?"

"No, you know where I like to start," Dr. Caring says in a soft wistful tone, "when you could sit down with a parent, look 'em in the eye, and, well, I know it always sounds funny, but shake their hand."

"That's way back, Vera, but OK," he whispers, recounting once more the way dentistry was before managed care.

"Dentistry was fun, Vera, and profitable. We really took care of the kids. There was a lot to do, what with caries, malocclusion and general prevention.

We actually talked to parents and shared what we knew. They were grateful and you got a real sense of satisfaction. I know it's hard to believe, but we made the decisions along with parents...money even changed hands, and we had physical contact with the kids."

"No robotics then?"

"No way. We'd examine and treat kids ourselves. It was great. No machines, scans, vaccines or computer simulations. The real stuff." Dr. Tired responds, now enjoying reminiscing.

"What happened, Barry?" Although she knows the answer, Dr. Caring has the look of childhood lost.

"Vera, we let it go. Our first mistake was training too many dentists. The competition in the eighties and nineties was fierce and divisive. Then there was the staggering debt of dental education. Managed care seemed like a quick fix for many. It put patients in the office."

"HMOs sprang up everywhere, promising consumers cost savings without sacrificing quality. Yes, employers saved some money, but as you know, most of the savings went to CEOs and shareholders of HMOs. Quality was defined by the lowest bidder. The public was seduced into believing that inexpensive prevention and education would replace costly care. Unfortunately, the corporate health industry judged its success on annual financial reports, and most HMOs never invested in prevention for the long haul. Many failed after a few years or were bought out during merger-mania."

"Is that when Powell-Care came along?" Dr. Caring tries to recall.

He smiles. "Yes. What irony! The same people who beat down the Clinton health care plan begged the next president to socialize health care to stop the new robber barons from totally destroying the system...but it was too late. The minute Powell-Care got into fiscal trouble, the Republicans privatized it to you know who.

That's where we are today — the health industry's ideal risk-benefit ratio...we get all the risk and the patients get very few benefits."

The two associates sit in silence for a few moments, then Dr. Caring asks, "Well, Barry, what are your plans for the weekend?"

"No big plans. I'm going to donate a day tomorrow at the CODENTS clinic."

"CODENTS? What's that?" Dr. Caring looks quizzically at the older man.

"Children of Downsized Executives Needing Treatment Services. The kids need the dental care, but their folks have too many assets for Powell-Care, no income and no HMO. The best part is, they're really appreciative. It's like the old days."

"Hmm, maybe I'll join you. Sounds like a plan I could sign on to."

Paul Casamassimo M.D. M.S.

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