

From doctor to patient in 4 words – “your troponin is 465”

An elevated troponin reflects heart damage...

48 hours ago the tables turned. Cast into a hurricane of uncertainty, this ED consultant became a patient. Behind the veil of droplet precautions and medical mumblings of “just a small prick now”, my journey began.

Every new patient is in unfamiliar territory, frightened, contemplating the uncharted admission that lies ahead of them. It was no different for me; perhaps knowing the various paths the journey could take made it worse.

My mirror reflects a different man tonight, his normally hairy body looks like a confused chess board. Patches shaved for defibrillation pads, ECG leads, angiography access, he’s sleep deprived, bruised, and just stepped off an emotional rollercoaster. So please forgive me for waxing lyrical about our public health system, the importance of the roles you all play, and for sharing some thoughts about how we approach uncertain times ahead. As it happens my COVID swabs were negative; we mustn’t forget the normal spectrum of illness still exists.

Charlies isn’t about grand entrances, elegant artworks, or even single rooms with private en-suites. We all know it’s an aging hospital that structurally and financially faces challenges. The treasure within these concrete walls is you, a truly exceptional team of dedicated and caring people. And I couldn’t be prouder right now, to be a small part of that team. Each of us plays a vital role and even if sometimes you don’t feel appreciated, I can assure you, your patients and your colleagues all notice what you do and how you do it.

Kindness and communication

Times have changed. Patients understand if we maintain our social distance – in fact they appreciate it. It’s more about eye contact, personal interaction and communication. Acknowledge anxiety, fear and uncertainty. Explain what is happening and why. Be kind. A cup of tea, a spontaneous conversation or a laugh about life outside the hospital is often the very best therapy.

What about COVID?

This pandemic is worrying. We are all adapting and learning and preparing. We need to accept a degree of uncertainty and change and adapt accordingly. We will make some mistakes. No one can predict exactly what will happen to us and our patients in Western Australia. I can assure you though, people are planning for all scenarios. Our government, our public health unit, our administrators and our infection control team are today’s unsung heroes.

As an individual in the system make sure you know your role now. Ask your supervisors if you have questions or concerns. Understanding PPE is very important. If your job will need you to wear PPE, learn how to put it on and take it off safely, a ten-minute lesson could save someone’s life. And perform hand hygiene / wash your hands properly and often.

Do what you do as well as you possibly can.

A wise woman once said if you “take care of the small things, the big things take care of themselves”. Our patients watch us, they listen for clues, they judge our expertise by the small things. Take pride in what you do and pay attention to detail.

In my world I put in lots of difficult peripheral IV cannulas (PIVCs). They loom very large in the patient’s eyes in their medical journey. If you put in PIVCs think carefully about them. Does the patient need one? Choose a site that will be best for the patient and their clinical situation. Make sure you use the best non-touch aseptic technique you can; let the chlorhexidine dry before you start. Clean up any blood that spills on the patient – otherwise it may stay there for days. And dress it beautifully – otherwise it will fall out. It’s OK to fail but don’t have more than two attempts if there’s someone you can ask for more expert help. Take pride in everything you do.

Keep an eye out for each other

These are difficult times. Make sure you have someone you can talk to if and when you need. Make a plan now for where you will go if you are struggling emotionally. There are lots of people and confidential resources we can use to support us all.

The professionalism, care, expertise, kindness and humanity I have experienced over the last few days has been exceptional and will remain with me as a momentous, life enriching journey forever.

Thank you

Thank you to the cheerful HSAs that smiled and introduced themselves, and told me where we were going, and smoothly guided my bed to its various destinations.

Thank you to the clerical staff who entered my details, prepared my notes, ushered in my visitors, ensured my labels were ready and correct, and did all those things I don’t even know about.

Thank you to the cleaners who made sure my room was spotless.

Thank you to the catering staff who fed me.

Thank you to the phlebotomists who so expertly took my blood.

Thank you to the pharmacists who prepared my medications and checked their safety.

Thank you to all our allied health services who tirelessly help get our patients back on their feet as they struggle to regain independence.

Thank you to the radiographers and technicians who enable all the imaging.

Thank you to the nurses who nurtured me through the uncertainty. Checking on me regularly, giving a sense of security, uncomplaining even when their tasks were unsavoury.

Thank you to the doctors who guided the decisions. Who performed the procedures. Who reported the tests. Who deliberated the diagnosis and so kindly communicated the findings and the plan.

And finally thank you to the team who are tirelessly steering the COVID response in our hospital and city and state. You are doing an exceptional job and we are all grateful.

I am so proud to be part of this team.

James Rippey