



## Lessons Learned Today: Leave Room for Hope

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### Commentary

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Some of you have seen my prior publications in these pages. I've discussed the need to refocus on prevention to mitigate the burden of chronic diseases, the severe dangers posed by misinformation and disinformation, the shame we are not more energized to reduce risk for Alzheimer's disease, the lack of support for public health through the pandemic and to prepare for future challenges, the crime of shortages in government funding for programs like Obesity Prevention that don't reach every state, and other related subjects. One key area is the need to highlight the reality of social determinants of health and the impact they have on physical, mental and economic health in underserved populations [1]. At the same time, we are bombarded with news from across the country and around the world of crisis in many forms, healthcare workforce shrinking and burned out, certain cable "news" outlets seemingly trying to undermine our wellbeing and create an culture of fear, an atmosphere of impending doom and general negativity. Whew! I cringe at the thought of our world, especially our healthcare systems subject to this influence.

I'm writing today to remind all that there are opposing views all around us that are reasons not to fear but hope. I was brought to this by some personal experiences that caused me to reflect on the differences between the "noise" around us and the reality of experience. This phenomena is both at the cultural and personal levels. I'm sure you share my concern about the preventable violence and death related to guns in our culture, and it's easy to become fatalistic on this topic, but look around. I've noticed after several instances of shootings lately large groups of people, especially young people, are visibly and vocally objecting and calling for change. These are the voters and policymakers of tomorrow. At the same

time many states are considering reasonable gun control reflecting majority opinion [1]. This isn't a panacea or even an immediate solution, but definitely allows room for hope.

Recent discussions of the healthcare workforce shortage have been numerous. Identified causes range from the pandemic, related burnout, unreasonable expectations, public (and political) criticism reducing prestige of the professions, aging workforce, and others [2-4]. At the same time great minds are proposing solutions including targeted recruitments, educational supports (especially in underrepresented communities), incentives to work in underserved areas, and flexibility in educational approaches [5,6]. These developments and ideas are not alone and key policymakers like Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro appear aware that they will be called upon to address this crisis and are prepared to try [7].

My primary reason for writing at this time though is not systemic but personal. In the past few months, I have had some health challenges on more than one occasion that brought me up close and personal to primary care, specialty care, hospital emergency services and inpatient services, hospital inpatient services with surgery, and a specialty "walk-in" clinic. My emergency visit and initial hospitalization occurred on New Year's Day. Severe abdominal pain was the trigger, and each person I and my wife interacted with were polite, caring, took time to answer our questions and calm my nerves facing potential surgery (it didn't happen that day). I remember remarking at the time that these people from specialists to aides (and particularly nurses) were really nice. Given all the news about shortages and burnout, it wasn't what I expected, and I was pleasantly surprised. I

remembered a wise mentor once told me to “always catch people doing it right”, this positive reaction can be contagious. So I wrote to Albany Medical Center and made that clear that my experience made a difference and I wanted leadership to know (I’m sure they hear when someone has a negative experience). My issue was treated and cleared in a few days, allowing me a few weeks ago to have a much safer and less invasive laparoscopic surgery. This time with a shorter stay I had a very similar experience with caring, patience (especially making sure my questions were answered and I understood), and kindness from people at all levels, support staff, nurses, physicians and students. My primary care providers made it a point to keep in touch through a very user-friendly portal and phone calls, again with patience and caring, allowing me to approach what might have been anxiety provoking process with confidence there was a good team behind me. My cardiologist was needed to clear me for surgery and again, took her time, made sure I understood what both the surgical process and aftermath would be like and that I understood she or one of her partners would be happy to see me when they made rounds in the hospital if I had any additional questions. My last example was last week. After a lifetime of allergies taking a toll on my nasal passages, I had recurring bloody nose symptoms. Since this was urgent but not an emergency, I was relieved to find that the practice of the specialist I’ve seen in this area had a walk-in clinic for their patients. I went, was seen after a very brief wait, and treated effectively by a PA. This bright, articulate professional again took her time to explain each step of the process, answered my questions and made sure I understood the necessary aftercare. This was all with a tone of caring and concern.

I share these examples because I can’t imagine I’m the

only one having positive interaction with the healthcare system and the quality humans that make it up at every level. So today I leave you with these thoughts. I am again reminded of bits of wisdom passed on to me by mentors. First, always take the opportunity to catch people doing it right, this reinforces positive behavior and could be contagious. Second, never miss hopeful signs when they appear in front of you. Let’s remember all the good we see in the world and especially in the people working in healthcare who understand the value of beneficence. In a world where we’re exposed to negativity daily - leave room for hope.

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