

An Aural Assault

BY BARBARA L. FINCH

It's funny how childhood memories can lie dormant for decades and then suddenly surface to shed light on something seemingly unrelated. This happened to me recently, when I spent five days in a hospital recovering from surgery.

As my morphine-induced euphoria began to fade, I suddenly had a vision of a large yellow sign, about the size of a stop sign. It was imprinted with bold black letters reading:

QUIET HOSPITAL ZONE

I knew this sign. It used to be on Washington Street near the Charleston General Hospital in the southern West Virginia town where I grew up. And when I was growing up, I never understood the sign. *Did it mean that kids from the nearby high school should be quiet when they got close to the hospital? Could people lying in bed inside that enormous red brick building really hear us talking outside? Or did the sign refer to noisy cars and trucks? Or maybe it was supposed to signal a moment of silence in tribute to all the poor sick souls trapped inside?*

Today, I think I know the answer. Whoever erected the sign made a mistake. It should have been *inside* the building.

My recent postsurgical stay (which, incidentally, was not in that West Vir-

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ginia hospital) was an experience in aural assault. Although I received superb care from competent and caring doctors and nurses, I was astounded by the level of noise that surrounded me. And I was in a private room!

What did I hear? As soon as I could sit up, I made a list:

Visitors talk, laugh, and argue in the hallway outside my door. Monitors beep. Physicians are paged. Food and laundry carts rattle. Phones ring. TVs blare. Toilets flush. Nurses and aides give and take orders in the hall. Patients moan. The ice machine clucks and lays its cubes. The nursing station searches for staff members by paging them in each room. Visitors drag wooden chairs across uncarpeted floors. Volunteers hawk newspapers. The clock on the wall

ticks so loudly I ask to have it removed (not an unusual request, according to my nurse).

No wonder I remembered that sign from my childhood as I lay considering whether I needed pain pills or ear plugs.

In an age where so much attention is focused on patient satisfaction, I was surprised at how little effort had been made to simply create a quiet environment where I could rest and recover. Most of the most aggravating noise could have been easily and economically controlled:

- Families do not have to stand in the hall and talk;

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every floor has lounges away from patient rooms, and hospital staff members should direct them there.

- Physicians do not have to be paged every few minutes; most of them wear beepers and can be easily summoned that way. Similarly, nurses could be outfitted with beepers, so they would not have to be paged in every patient room.

- Television sets can be turned down, squeaky wheels greased, and chair legs tipped with felt or rubber to make them less noisy.

- Volunteers can be instructed to tap gently on the door and quietly inquire if patients would like to purchase a newspaper.

- And, yes, it would be nice if patients could be kept comfortable, so they wouldn't have to moan.

Has modern medicine created an atmosphere where peace and quiet have been sacrificed to hustle and bustle? If so, then I am not sure that patient care has been very much enhanced. And if any of those old street signs are still hanging around in some West Virginia warehouse, I hope someone will give me a call. I know exactly where I'd like to put one. □

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