Vital Signs

A lesson from Penn State

By: Justin Glasgow

The recent scandal at Penn State which involves allegations of child sexual abuse, a failure to properly report the allegations, and the firing of many officials including the head football coach and the University president offers a key lesson for patient safety. No matter an individual’s position in the healthcare system, there is no excuse for not recognizing and stopping potential errors before patient harm occurs or properly reporting events to prevent future events. As medical students we are new to the ways of medicine, instinctively try to hide this naiveté, and often think that we should look up the answer later rather than ask the question now. This self-consciousness creates a silence which ignores our critical role in protecting patients. The naiveté that we so fear actually creates a unique and critical viewpoint that catches the slips, lapses and mistakes that lead to serious patient harm. In patient care, we are more than quiet observers. We share a responsibility with all of the multidisciplinary team members to speak up and ensure the best patient care. This includes ensuring proper time-outs prior to surgeries or procedures and providing timely reminders about proper hand hygiene. Another way to improve patient safety is to take the time to properly reconcile patients’ medications, think about each medication’s necessity, identify the potential for harmful interactions, and address dangerous instances of polypharmacy. Further, we need to review current guidelines and ensure all patients receive evidence based care.

Beyond these front line efforts, there are other important opportunities for medical students to improve safety. First, use the PSN (Patient Safety Network) online reporting system for all patient safety incidents that have the potential of leading to patient harm. PSN is available from most computers in the hospital and via the Point. Second, you can learn more about quality improvement and patient safety in healthcare by exploring the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (ihi.org) or participating in the local IHI Open School chapter. Third, advocate for and participate in quality improvement and patient safety activities in the curriculum including the newly established M4 elective.

In closing, I’d like to return to the Penn State situation. While only those individuals know why they made the decisions they did, it appears that some individuals did not speak to authorities hoping to protect themselves and the image of the institution. As medical students we may hesitate to address a patient safety concern fearing the impact it may have on our reviews. While there are systems in place to support and protect us if necessary, I would hope that there is never a situation where personal interest trumps patient safety.

Justin is the President of the Iowa Institute for Healthcare Improvement Open School Chapter.

Also in This Issue:

Update from Student Gov’t

Poetry by: Cody Connor, Muthanna Yacoub

Image: the new Children’s Hospital at the University of Iowa. View from Kinnick Stadium. (uihealthcare.org)
Woven Life

By: Cody Connor

Beyond the ocean’s salty breeze, where sunlight filters through the trees, an age-worn figure sits and weaves threads like rivers through the leaves.

Blankets renowned through the land, Majestic warmth made by hand, Softer than a rabbit’s fur, Delicate but tough like her.

Much is said of these rare quilts, that owner’s body never wilts, that with their touch on skin at night, would deter Death, subdue its bite.

With every one she finishes, her health and life diminishes. The skill she has, for man’s, a gift, but, to herself, a curse to lift.

For once she’d loved, but long ago, and who slept soundly just beyond, and groans and grunts came scarily, I saw, ahead, quite distinctly, I knew not what would next occur.

I held the reigns, clenched his fur, that halted the stride of Death’s approach, and ensure he shall not encroach. Xander trotted over stream, raging on like a muffled scream."

So now, these legendary threads, will replace brews and herbal spreads. Though I can’t know, the risk is due, I’ll make the trip and pray tales true.

With a parting kiss, her fears caress my lips with dying tears. I taste an urgency within. The bitter truth: her death begins.

Ride hard, don’t stop, continue on, in dark of night or ray of sun, through marsh and forest, over plain, atop the rocks of mountain range.

And this I did with hastened stride. On mighty Xander, I did ride. Hooves of iron, thighs of girth, his legs like terrors to the earth, For three days, I headed west, fueled by love and by contest. For in the morn, the sun bid chase, but after noon I lost the race.

I'd chase that orb into the ground, till shadows blended all around, till owls hooted cautious tales, and creatures stirred from hidden vales.

Haunting noises filled the air, the woodland densened, branches bare. No plants lived, the mud was thick. The mist hung, vexing, vile, sick. Xander trotted over stream, that raged on like a muffled scream. I held the reigns, clenched his fur, I knew not what would next occur.

Lost we were, in trees and trees, a milieu of dark disease, but soon the boughs thinned overhead, and beams of moonlight pierced and spread.

And with the newfound imagery, I saw, ahead, quite distinctly, the image of a hut of sticks, my eyes, I knew, weren’t playing tricks. We neared the structure, warily, and groans and grunts came scarily, and who slept soundly just beyond, I didn't know, and so fright spawned.

A snapping twig, a crunching leaf, beneath our hooves did cause me grief. And, upon its sounding out, the snores beyond transformed to shout. “Who is it just outside my hut? Enjoy, for now, your throat uncut. For if you take a step more here, I’ll slice you swiftly, ear-to-ear.”

I shuddered at the voice, so cold. It was the tone, not what was told, That filled me with a pure terror, and had me choking, insecure. I couldn’t speak, until I saw, emerge from shadows wrinkled jaw. Her eyes so depthless, face so old, a sight I’d searched to soon behold.

And now she was in front of me, the spectral quilter, famed granny, the ever-knitting hands of life, whose wares I prayed would save my wife. “Please don’t fear. I’ve come for aid. Relax yourself. Lay down your blade. I’ve traveled far. My horse needs rest. You are the reason for my quest.

I’ve heard of blankets that you knit, that grant the dying life permit, that halt the stride of Death’s approach, and ensure he shall not encroach. My wife, my love, grows frail and weak. Her life is fading, future bleak. A pestilence has taken her, and without you, she dies for sure.

So I have come, in humble form, to ask of you to keep her warm, to give to me a treasured gift, which, towards good health, will bid her shift.”

Long she stood, her visage blurred, thoughts astir, but all unheard. Charity would have its price. Her for my wife: the sacrifice. I’ll make the trip

It was a while, stillness dawned. The breaths of Xander hissed beyond. The words she thought hung on her lips, then fell the way that water drips.
"My life has been so pained and stretched.
The years upon my face are etched.
Hundreds if you will believe,
my lifelong duty to reprieve.

I've never known another way,
and wondered if I'd see the day,
that all my work would culminate,
and all lives saved would bring my fate.

And here I am, so old and frail,
two hundred years to forge my tale,
ten thousand quilts carefully made,
ten thousand lives I've lived to save.

And now I reach the final one.
Just one more quilt, and then I'm done.
Just one more wielding of the thread.
Just one more tying needle head.

I'll tell you this, I'm sure of it,
your love is clear, your plea befit,
and so I'll use my final breath,
to make my compromise with Death.

To knift this blanket for your wife,
and in its fibers stitch my life.
And when my heart gives final beat,
My misery will be complete."

With her words, she'd turned and gone,
and so I lay to wait for dawn.
Xander and I, curled on the dirt.
To sleep, I let my woes divert.

When I stirred at daybreak's glare,
it's light shone red through eyelids' stare.
And when I opened up my eyes,
I found upon me soft surprise.

A blanket, gently draped on me,
elaborate with stitched artistry,
the colors vibrant and alive,
and with its touch, I felt revived.

I rose to stand, and shouted out.
My thanks bounced off tree trunks throughout.
But no response returned to me.
The woman was now fantasy.

I searched for her, but found her not,
so leapt on Xander, moved to trot.
The blanket lay upon his skin,
and glowed its maker's life within.

The forest, now, was not all dead,
for in the mud fresh ferns did spread,
and all around me flowers bloomed.
Her life, as well, the wood assumed.

I made it home, nearly too late,
for on the floor my wife did wait.
Coughing, twisting, swathed in sweat,
In darkened room, a silhouette.

To her side, I rushed in panic.
Felt her smoldering head: satanic.

Touched her body: strained and tense,
then covered her with quilt's defense.

Soon the coughs and twisting ceased,
and color in her cheeks increased,
and all her pain and agony,
stopped at once quite thankfully.

But no sooner had she healed,
than was a message then revealed.
Upon the face of her new sheet,
were words there woven, quite discreet.

"An eternity of thanks from me,
for my responsibility,
has now been lifted from my hands,
and borne by yours, you understand.

You must knit, my power's yours,
and make the quilts the gods implore,
for if you don't take up the chore,
this gift won't serve you anymore.

And within days, again you'll feel,
the chill of Death upon your heel,
the pang of love torn from your grip,
the torture as you fade and rip."

Confused, embracing, long we wept.
Sorrow crept, we barely slept.
A second chance, but at what cost?
Had we won or had we lost?
A message from the Student Government

CCOMSG has been hard at work trying to make your holiday dreams come true. Well, maybe not holiday dreams, but you get the picture. Here's what's new with us:
1) Say goodbye to your wrinkled bills because University ID card payment is now available in the MERF Coke machine.
2) We recently met with UI Parking and Transportation to convey student parking concerns identified in a survey taken last year. They agreed to consider our suggestions and will get back to us soon.
3) Thank you to everyone who made CCOM on Ice at the Coralville ice rink a successful event. The first CCOM Open Mic will take place at The Mill to wrap up this semester's activities. Look forward to Cheese for Charity, Crista Gala and Frolics next semester.

Amy Domeyer-Klenske
Student Body President

Autumn

By: Muthanna Yacoub

Cold colder with a charred schism between crisp
Dryness and bite, arctic, carried through the wind
From the north,
And the warm savoury flavour of wood burning
Between the orange cottonwoods barely above
Gently grazing my hair as I stand as tall as I can

And then shiver humbly as the breeze reminds me:
It's autumn

Horizon lines and Horizon sun caresses my skin
And the crests of the tight stitches of my jeans and coat
Each step towards that horizon and setting sun
Brings back memories of the ones I hold dear
And the ones I wish to laugh with once again

Northwind, wood-carrying Winterwind
Gently graze my hair as I stand as tall as I can

Keep me company as I venture forth
In my rampant, self-destructive adventures
In the search for a mission
In the pursuit of a dream
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BASED ON KNOW-HOW.

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