

I stumbled upon Dr Fogoros' website late one night, long past my bedtime. I was bleary and exhausted, but I couldn't pull myself away from my laptop. I was fascinated by his theory that our disordered healthcare system would give birth to a new type of doctor -- one who would give up regular practice to doggedly advocate for patients facing serious illnesses. I wasn't simply interested – I was shocked. Dr. Fogoros was describing a practice model that I thought I had invented; he was describing MY fledgling practice. I had mixed emotions as I explored page after page -- his ideas challenged my originality but they also endorsed my credibility and validated my passion.

In *Fixing American Healthcare* Dr. Fogoros accurately describes the desperate state of our healthcare system – a system that frustrates both doctors and patients and has turned us against each other. As he describes, I have rushed through 30 patients in a day, unable to give adequate time to any of them. I have received reports from insurance companies comparing my spending to those of my peers and argued angrily with HMO medical directors about declined medical procedures. I even understand the fear of government regulatory attack, as I was a resident at Thomas Jefferson University during Medicare's aggressive and unfair audit.

I entered medicine idealistic and hopeful, but I soon saw that things weren't as I had anticipated; I knew something wasn't right. My patients were overwhelmed, frustrated and easily angered. My colleagues complained about their demanding, needy and ungrateful patients. Society seemed to imply that doctors had become greedy and lazy. No one was happy. The doctor-patient relationship was heading for divorce court and

patients seemed to be getting lost in all the bickering. I gave the best care that I could, first in a small, rural practice and then in a suburban Family Medicine residency program, and I suppressed years of nagging doubts. Ultimately, two compelling events occurred simultaneously that disrupted my inertia: my oldest daughter developed significant health problems and my closest childhood friend got breast cancer.

I suddenly found myself on the other side of the healthcare fence, and the view from there was disturbing. Wearing the hats of doctor, mother, and friend I helped my loved ones navigate the medical maze. I noticed missed diagnoses, perfunctory doctors, conflicting medical advice, and powerful, yet unacknowledged, emotions. Despite the intensity inherent in advocating for loved ones, I found that I loved the process. I was energized by poring over medical literature and gratified by offering middle-of-the night support. I had an epiphany about the experience of illness and tried to translate that into better care for my own patients. “I get it now”, I told myself, and yet, to my utter dismay, I was unable to provide the kind of care to my own patients that I wanted for my friend and my daughter. I simply couldn’t give intense, holistic, patient-centered care in the 15-minute office visit demanded by the system in which I practiced.

So I did the unthinkable. I left my job as a teaching attending and christened myself a Private Medical Care Advisor.

This road, from ‘regular’ doctor to the amorphous and slippery place that I now find myself, has been challenging. Malpractice insurers, ignoring my pristine record and

declining to offer explanation, initially rejected my request for coverage. Some patients, even those with adequate financial resources, can't get past the idea that I don't take insurance. Some doctors are disdainful, as though I have somehow 'sold out' or broken ranks. Even some of my close physician friends have a new measured, and slightly suspicious, tone as they ask me about my new practice. I feel a little like an Amish woman who has begun wearing brightly colored clothing. I haven't been excommunicated yet, but they are keeping an eye on me.

It is difficult to be a pioneer and I do have moments of doubt. However my perspective has been permanently altered and there is no going back. Dr. Fogoros' book has renewed my determination to find a new, mutually satisfying, way to practice my craft. Patients must reclaim their healthcare and doctors need to help them find their power. We must get over our need to control the healthcare encounter and be willing to roll up our sleeves and get dirty. We need to wade into people's fears, doubts and uncertainties and assure them that we will help them the best that we can. However if we, doctors, are going to expose the imperfections of our potions and our procedures, then patients, insurers and government regulators need to cut us some slack. It is unhelpful and unfair to criticize us for acting like we are perfect and then to crucify us when we fail.

Along with patient empowerment we must embrace a holistic view of health – one that strives not only for magic cures, but that also recognizes the crucial role of emotional contentedness, spiritual connectedness, and self-awareness. But to do this, doctors must have not only the motivation, but also the time. No matter how pure the intentions, 15

minutes is not enough time to delve into the realms of illness where the sickest patients dwell.

I realize that I cannot change the system; I can only change myself. But I believe that by offering patients a taste of a holistic doctor-patient relationship, uncomplicated by conflicting loyalties, I can begin to change their expectations. Once they feel nurtured, powerful, and in control of their health and their healthcare, they will not want to go back to the darker days. These empowered patients will initially be frightening to doctors' egos but it is only the transition that will be hard. Clearly most doctors want their patients to get well, and I believe they will quickly realize the benefits of working with educated, motivated and empowered people.

Imagine if one day a group of physicians-in-training learns, not how to improve a patient's compliance, but how to enhance her empowerment. What an exciting and healthy time that will be. We physicians are not Gods, we are guides. We cannot guarantee cure but we can provide the comfort of compassionate partnership. And, most importantly, we can walk beside our patients when they are ill, sharing our wisdom, our humanity, and ourselves.

Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

www.InsightMedicalConsultants.com