

## 9-28-12 The Importance of Diagnosing

A woman visited the office the other day to inquire about cancer rates. She had concerns about the prevalence of a certain type on her street. A good starting place for her, I thought, would be to go directly to the online Massachusetts Department of Public Health, where she can look at cancer statistics by type and town and then call that department. You see, she wanted to know if she could interest anyone in studying the area, for what she saw as an usually high incidence of kidney cancer. She wondered if anyone was gathering this information.

We also talked about the importance of what the physician chooses to write on a death certificate. You might think that when someone dies of cancer, it would simply state so. While the cancer might have been the underlying cause of death, the last breath may have faded away due to pneumonia or a generalized weakened condition after chemo therapy and radiation and/or immune system suppression as part of the treatment. In fact, a death certificate might say “Respiratory Failure”. I guess that means the person stopped breathing.

Benjamin Franklin was known to have said that each morning he woke at nine, read the paper and, if his name was not in the obituary section, he got up. I have a feeling Ben’s insatiable curiosity would also have wanted to know from what he died.

Knowing and documenting the cause of death does not help those who are grieving their loss but it does make a difference for the future cases. Time, technology and finances can be given to learn more about the disease and to prevent or cure it. It also makes a difference in health education. How can we avoid what we aren’t aware of? Why should we care about something we think is rare and far away?

There were three other instances last week where I found myself appreciating the importance of accurate record keeping. I was especially cognizant of the importance of diagnosing. Records cannot reflect the reality if physicians do not diagnose. This happens all the time with food-borne illness. Most people who are that ill with severe intestinal problems don’t even go to the doctor (understandable!) and when they do, most often, the symptoms are treated without testing. Last year, how many cases of salmonella or E. coli did we have? We just don’t know for sure, if physicians do not test.

This is happening all around us, right now, in connection with West Nile virus (WNV). While it may be possible for a person to have an early case of seasonal influenza, “flu like symptoms” are also the first signs of Eastern Equine encephalitis (EEE), WNV and Lyme disease. When a doctor says, “It’s viral; go home; you’ll feel better soon”, the patient is leaving without the information required to make the best decisions later on. When is it appropriate to

call 911? How does the patient connect this month's "flu like symptoms" that went away with next month's joint pain from Lyme disease requiring antibiotic treatment?

While EEE is usually so deadly and quickly garners our attention with the high fever and severe headache that can lead to swelling of the brain, WNV is almost always milder. However, someone such as me, a person over fifty, is at higher risk of severe illness and/or death.

While there is no cure for either of these viral diseases that start off as "flu-like" (but are not the flu); palliative, supportive care at the hospital can make a difference. I personally know of two people who may have had WNV, were told they probably had the flu and were not tested. How many do you know?

You have the right to simple blood tests to inform you of your body! Please don't accept guesses from your physician; ask questions and demand at least an attempt at diagnosing. When you do, you are playing a critical role in public health. Those diagnoses get reported and the reports are tabulated and they join the statistics informing future funding, public education, local awareness and even legislature.

The other incident from last week that smacked me across the face with incredulity was when a family decided to handle a dog biting a child by keeping it hush- hush, and would "just put the dog down". At first they did not even bring the child to the doctor! If it weren't for the child's wounded lips looking infected, thus requiring medical attention, I may never have found out. I'll eventually get that report from the attending physician, as they are required to report dog bites. Well, I'll receive it if the parents and grandparents tell the doctor the truth!

As for the dog, the reason it is critical to follow protocol and report the bite and let the local Animal Inspector quarantine the dog, is that it can save that child's life! Research has shown that if a dog is shedding the rabies virus at the time of the bite, the symptoms of rabies will continue and the dog will die within ten days. Then, the dog's brain can be tested for rabies and the child will be treated with the preventative series of life-saving shots. Just imagine, if the hush-hush family put the dog down, never tested it for rabies and never brought the child to the doctor. The rabies virus sometimes takes months before it manifests itself in the victim. By then, it is too late; as there is no cure for rabies. You get it; you die.

Get diagnosed. Stay informed. Follow protocol. Take part in Public health.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She welcomes your inquiries at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*