

12-14-12 No Diseases on Maven Today

Administrative assistant, Peggy, efficiently announced, “No diseases on Maven. That’s a good thing!” I burst out laughing, which, of course, would have been very inappropriate if Maven was a patient. No one else was in the room to hear me laugh about Maven, so, it was okay because I knew Peggy was not reporting on a person but giving me an update on a tracking system.

The name might be derived from the Yiddish word for an accumulator of knowledge but the system accomplishes more than just an accumulation. A pile or list of information is only as useful as what you do with it. In this case, our Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) can identify and follow trends with this system, allowing us to respond to current events and prepare for approaching ones.

I remember the day we met up in between conference sessions a couple years ago when Peggy first told me of the system for the online tracking of reportable diseases. She was very excited about it. She had been opening envelopes arriving in the mail for a year or so at that point and she was looking forward to this paperless version. For the next couple years we continued to hear that it was on its way. Then we heard through the gripevine of it becoming a necessity and a requirement of local boards of health and the medical profession. Convincing the public health nurses to go this route was challenging. They were older than Peggy and reluctant to give up the paper and resistant to the command to sit down and learn a new way of doing things. Peggy, on the other hand, thought it was fun!

I could relate to the nurses’ reluctance to give up the paper. Holding an envelope in your hand is such a tangible experience and the opening of the envelope literally and figuratively unfolds with the tension and excitement of what lies beyond. It had a story to tell about a real person in “my” town. The novella arrived in the form of an envelope from the State Lab. I would open it with anticipation. Was it yet another case of Lyme disease or Hepatitis C?

The top half would be unfolded first, revealing the disease. There were several instances where I was surprised by the diagnosis of something that can be easily missed or “simply” treated rather than identified. I can think of three times when I exclaimed, “What? Legionellosis? (Legionnaires’ Disease) It takes a Dr. Cuchural (my PCP) to take the time to test for that!” I proceeded to unfold the paper to reveal the reporting physician: Dr. George Cuchural. This also happened with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and several cases of Lyme Disease: Dr. George Cuchural.

I admit, with a sigh, to longing for those opportunities, for I can recall what I experience. Those tactile and emotional experiences imprint upon my mind and heart, resulting in something unforgettable and meaningful. For me, reading and placing letters and numbers on the computer screen take away the potential for learning, rather than enhance it.

Even looking at the training manual makes my head spin. Sometimes it makes me laugh, though. Proof reading is in my blood, I guess, and typos jump out at me. I found a good one in the training manual: “Place curse in the square above the number 1 and to the left of A and click once – document will be highlighted.” They meant “cursor”, of course, but the thought of a curse being placed on a disease tracking system made me smile.

Maven is based on Excel charts, which Peggy loves. I can handle it but prefer Word documents and inserting pictures. I conceptualize through images, requiring paper and pen to sketch when explaining things. Peggy organizes the world through Excel. She gets quiet and clicks away and when she’s done, she’s satisfied! But I am not the administrative assistant (thank God!) and it’s a good thing that we have different types of learners in the world and in the same office. So, Maven is real, up and running, and the nurses don’t have any choice. They send and receive reports via Maven now and it’s a good day for us all, in Halifax anyway, when Maven has no diseases.

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